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OR,
A HARD NUT TO CRACK.

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AUTHOR OF "PICAYUNE PETE," "DETECTIVE
DICK," "WILL WILDFIRE,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRANSFER OF A MYSTERY.

"PILE in; I'm yer hoss!"
"Not much of a hoss, youngster. A sort of
Canadian pony you be, I reckon."
"Jist don't you git behind me when I'm in a
kickin' humer, or maybe you mought think I'm
a Wild West broncho!"

These words passed between two very different persons, in a plainly furnished room of a

"YOU CONFOUNDED YOUNG REPROBATE, YOU WILL HAVE IT THEN!" CRIED THE
HORSEMAN, IN A FURY, AS HE RAISED HIS RIDING WHIP.

house in the lower section of the city of Philadelphia.

One of them, Jacob Grim by name, was a short, stout, grizzled-faced old fellow, of some sixty years of age, who looked as weather-beaten as if he had been lost on a desert island for half his lifetime.

His companion was a well-grown lad, apparently about eighteen years old. He was small of size for that age, yet looked as if he knew enough of the world to be eighty instead of eighteen.

Billy Brick, as the boys called him, had indeed been to a hard school. He knew nothing whatever of father or mother, and had been rubbed against the roughest side of life in a great city till he was as sharp as if he had been ground on a grindstone.

What his real name was he did not know himself, and cared as little. There was some mystery surrounding his parentage, and old Grim, who had always kept half an eye on him, certainly knew more about the boy than he chose to tell.

But little of all this troubled Billy Brick. He took life as it came, for hit or miss, and had grown up into a very hard nut to crack, for any one who should try to get the best of him.

The attitudes of the two persons showed their characters. Old Grim, dressed in a suit of stout corduroy, was seated squarely in an arm-chair, his elbows resting on the arms, and his face set, in as cross a look as if he had just swallowed a green persimmon.

The boy, on the contrary, whose ill-fitting dress seemed the cast-off garments of half-a-dozen different persons, was seated in a tilted-back chair, his heels on the table, and his shabby hat thrust rakishly over his left ear.

The lad was by no means ill-looking. His skin was tanned as brown as a berry, and the bright sparkle in his eyes told of a keen brain and wide-awake wits.

And he was likely to have need of wit and daring ere he was much older. Dangers were gathering around the youth unknown to himself, which were destined to try and prove his character to the utmost.

A grating laugh came from old Grim, as the boy spoke. But his face quickly settled again into its serious and sour expression.

"See here, boy," he remarked. "You've been having a jolly fling of it all your life, haven't you now?"

"Reckon there's fellers as has had it jollier," replied the boy carelessly. "I ain't never kicked though, 's long's I had a bone to gnaw, and the soft side 'o a plank to bunk on. Don't take much to keep this rooster cawin'."

The old man looked at him, with something of sorrow and trouble on his wrinkled face.

"I'm goin' to leave you, my boy. Ye're goin' to lose your sour old daddy."

"By Jiminy!" cried the lad, springing up so suddenly as to overturn his chair. "Them's news! What's afloat now?"

"You'll have to dig for yourself, Billy. I can't even leave you no money. It'll take every cent I can rake to carry out what I'm after."

"Don't git inter no spring fever 'bout that. Reckon I kin hoe my row. 'Tain't that as ails me. What bee's got inter yer bonnet, that's what I want ter know. Goin' away ter leave me? That ain't fair, nobow."

"It can't be helped," remarked the old man, shaking his grizzled head, sadly.

"But who's goin' ter take keer o' you, that's what I want know? No trouble 'bout this coon gittin' 'long. But you ain't fit to go 'lone, without me ter look arter you. An' you know that, daddy."

"Why, you conceited young scoundrel!" broke out the old man, impatiently.

Then he checked himself, and his sides shook with a cackling laugh.

"Blame my optics if the boy ain't jist a honey from the word go!" he declared. "Guess I can trust you to get along, Billy. But I fancy I don't need a wet-nurse yet."

"Dunno," answered Billy, shaking h's head, doubtfully. "Kinder looks dubyous."

"Come to anchor, youngster, and shet up your log-book till I get in my say. I've got something to tell you of great importance. So take a reef in your gab till I've spilled my provender."

"Dive ahead, daddy!" rejoined the irrepressible boy, as he seated himself and flung his heels again on the table. "Pile in, I'm yer hoss; as I said awhile ago."

"Then take down them canal boats. This business is serious, and I don't want you to put on no airs while I'm talking."

Thus admonished, Billy took down his feet,

pulled his chair up to the table, and put on as sober a look as his face was able to take.

The old man straightened himself up, and faced the boy.

"You are old enough now, my boy," he began, "to know some things which it was not wise to trouble you with in your younger days. And things have come to such a pass that I must speak out plainly."

"For years I have been living on the crater of a volcano, not knowing what minute I might tumble in and be done for."

Billy looked up in surprise and interest at this unexpected remark.

"'Tain't 'bout ter bu'st out jist now, is it?" he queried. "If 'tis, I reckon I'll git."

"I have for many years past been in the possession of a secret," resumed the old man, paying no attention to the boy's sally, "which would make things mighty squally for certain important persons if I was to let it out."

"A secret?" questioned the boy, with growing interest.

"I have more than the secret. If it had been only that I would have been done for long ago. They would have settled my hash without waiting for salt and pepper. They ain't the sort that would stop long when only an old man's life was in the way."

"Lawseel!" cried Billy. "You don't say as they'd killed you?"

"As quick as they would a cat."

"Then, by Jiminy, I'd made somebody sweat!" cried the boy, bringing his fist down fiercely on the table, while his young face blazed with excitement. "The chap that hurts my daddy Grim, ain't goin' to have no walk-over, while I'm 'round, now you bet!"

"Good for you, Billy! Give me your hand!" cried the old man, delightedly. "So you'd put in a left-hander for old Grim, would you, my boy?"

"Nary time. It'd be a right-hander. And straight from the shoulder, too."

"Well, I guess that there won't be any use for it," resumed the old man. "The secret wasn't all. There's something else I've got that's more important yet. Killing me wouldn't done them any good, and they knowed that mighty well. It was that other thing they wanted. They've tried many a game to get it, but they ain't euchered the old coon yet."

He broke again into one of his short, cackling laughs.

"I was sharp enough to put that where the keenest of them couldn't find it. They've been creeping about under water for years, but ain't picked up nothing. I was too old for them, Billy."

"And what's up, now? Goin' to be a turn in the tide?"

"That's it exactly. There's some things to be done connected with this secret that nobody can do but me. And to do them I must go thousands of miles away, and maybe be two or three years absent. Though it may be much shorter."

"Don't quite like that," said Billy, with a serious shake of the head. "Best take me 'long to look arter you."

"Can't be did. You must stay here. I have my reasons."

"And the secret, daddy. And the thing. What 'bout them?"

"The secret must stay one still. As for the thing, it holds the secret and much more. That I intend to leave in your charge, my boy."

"In my charge!" exclaimed Billy, opening his eyes widely, with surprise and excitement.

"It is a dangerous matter to hold," continued Old Grim. "It may bring you to your death unless you are cunning as a fox. It troubles me to the heart to have to expose you to this peril. But I do not see my way clear to any other action."

"Jist you bet I'll fight hard for my white ally!" cried the boy proudly. "They mought salt me, but they won't find it no baby's job."

"I know that. I know you've got sense and judgment, or I'd take any risk rather than imperil your life."

"Never felt so much like a man in my life," declared Billy, straightening himself up proudly.

"Listen to me, lad. I would take this thing with me, but for the danger that I may never come back again. My foes will not fail to follow me, and if they find that in my possession I would not give a chestnut for my life."

"Don't you think o' no sech nonsense as takin' it," exclaimed Billy.

"I might leave it here hidden where it now is. But if I should die in my absence it might never be found. Or it might be found by the wrong parties."

"Which wouldn't be comfortable."

"Hardly. Then again, I might leave it in other hands than in yours, but I don't know anybody I could trust."

"It's kinder narrering down to me."

"There is a reason why you, and you only, must take this charge, with all its dangers," resumed the old man. "It is because you are most nearly interested in the secret involved. What that secret is I cannot tell you, but it is the pivot on which your life hinges."

"Jiminy peppers!" cried Billy, whose excitement was now growing intense.

"There is, as I have told you before, a mystery connected with your life. That mystery cannot be revealed until you are twenty-one years of age. I can't say that I've done much for you, my boy. I'm a rough old customer that have had hard scratching to make my own way. But I've always kept an eye on you. And I intend to do so, as far as I can, until the day comes in which this long-hidden mystery shall be revealed."

"You've jist been the makin' o' me, Daddy Grim," cried the boy, squeezing the old man's hand, while tears came to his grateful eyes. "I've been a kickin' colt, I know that, but I ain't been blind to your goodness."

Old Grim broke away, wiping the back of his hand across his eyes.

"Wait here till I come back," he ordered in a tone of forced roughness.

The boy waited. What fancies and visions passed through his mind during that wait we shall not attempt to tell.

A half-hour passed ere the old man returned. When he did so there was something carefully concealed under his coat.

"What I give you, my boy," he began, "you must guard as the apple of your eye. No one knows that it has passed from my hands, though some may suspect. For your life do not breathe a word of its being in your possession. If it becomes known I would not give a farthing for your chance of a long life."

"If I should fail to return, open it when you are twenty-one. But not before. You will then know how to act. But perhaps I am asking too much of you. Are you willing to accept this charge, after all that I have told you?"

"Jist you bet yer bottom dollar on that," answered Billy, with a return of his reckless spirit. "And if they try any o' the'r ugly tricks round me I reckon I'll make some o' them caper afore they snuff me out."

"Then here it is. Guard it for life and honor. I know you and trust you."

He withdrew his concealed hand. What it held was a small, flat box or casket, of polished steel inlaid with gold. It was about six by eight inches in size, and glittered like a magic talisman in the boy's wide-open eyes.

He took it in his hand with a feeling as if he had received the fatal treasure of the genii.

CHAPTER II.

BILLY AT HOME AND ABROAD.

SINCE the date of our last chapter a month has passed away. Three weeks ago Jacob Grim left the city on his errand of mystery.

His departure was managed with the utmost secrecy and caution. At midnight he made his way quietly to a train, accompanied only by his youthful *protege*, to whom he gave many last words of warning on the way thither.

The boy was to conceal his perilous charge in some secret place, where it was never likely to be disturbed, and to take care not to lead suspicion to the spot.

And he was to avoid talking of the subject as he would avoid taking poison.

"There's enough other stuff for talk," declared old Grim, "even for as long a tongue as yours. Ain't no use walking on hot irons, when there's cold water handy."

"Me talk!" cried Billy indignantly. "Why, there ain't a boy in Philameclink that's got as short a tongue; and you oughter know that."

"Short, is it? Then by the Barnegat frog-ponds it's got an awful wag to it! But that ain't here nor there. You can't stop a mill-race from running by giving it good advice, so all you've got to do is to dig it the channel you want it to run in."

"Don't you clip off 'nother word 'bout it," cried the perverse boy, "or I'll just go and talk box! A feller mought think I hadn't the sense I was born with."

"Wasn't born with much," growled old Grim sourly. "Got to trust you, I s'pose, but I'd just as soon trust a cat with a milk-pan."

"Reckon I ain't bad on the lick," rejoined Billy, with a laugh. "That's what the boys think, anyhow, when they come crowdin' me."

"I wish you could only stay in my house," continued Grim thoughtfully. "I had a hiding-place there where the box was safe for years."

"Why couldn't I? Ain't I old 'nough fur housekeepin'?"

"It's a rented house, Billy. It's out o' the question for you to pay the rent. You're old enough, though, to do something better than howling round the streets, picking up stray pennies. You'd better work yourself into a store, or into some steady business."

"Mebbe I mought," answered the boy soberly. "Beginning to feel like a man, I am. Can't go on furever penny-grubbin'; but you bet it's jist jolly papers. Hate to giv it up."

The hour for the outgo of the train had arrived. The old man clasped the boy impulsively in his arms, with an ardent hug, his cross face growing soft for the moment, and moisture standing in his eyes.

Then he hurried through the gate, and Billy was left standing alone on the platform, with the sad feeling that he had lost his only friend in the world.

He walked away, kicking his heels on the pavement as a vent to his feelings.

"Dunno what's the matter with my eyes," he muttered savagely. "Feel's if an oil well had bu'sted out in 'em. I wish somebody'd kick me. I won't be jist myself ag'in till somebody kicks me."

He laughed grimly at the thought.

"I reckon as how maybe somebody'd wish he hadn't. Lawsee, wouldn't that fellow see blue lightnin' fur awhile! I'll jist have ter go somewhere an' bu'st down a stone wall with my cocoanut. Won't never feel right till I've run my top-knot through a stone wall."

Yet as the days passed on, Billy soon became himself again.

His first care had been to hide the mysterious casket in what he considered a very secure place. His next had been to go briskly into the ugly task of making his living.

So far he had always been able to fall back on old Grim when he found himself in a tight place. That refuge was gone. He had nobody now to trust to but himself.

Billy had been in the habit of getting his meals where and when he could. But he had lately got a regular sleeping-place, a cubby-hole of a room in the top story of a house kept by an old Irishwoman.

From this room the boy emerged one morning, three weeks after the departure of Jacob Grim. He locked the door and put the key into his pocket. Down-stairs he went, whistling as gayly as a lark.

"Yere's the key, Judy," he said to his landlady. "I'll jist stick it in the old place. Don't like ter leave my vallybles layin' round loose, 'ca'ze sneaks mought slip in and raise partik'lar rats 'mongst my combustibles."

The old lady stood looking at him, with her hands on her hips, and her face swimming with greasy good-humor.

"Jist hear till the ridik'us gossoon!" she laughed. "An' it's not enough in the room he has to buy a pig-tail plug of 'baccy fer a Con-naught beggar. To h'arkin till his gab ye'd think ther' was di'monds galore, when ther' ain't the wu'th o' a gutter-stone outside o' the decent furniture I've purvided the lat."

"Anyhow it's spruce and tasty, Judy. And I don't want no other birds a-settin' in my nest. I've got my notions that way. That's why I allers fotch down the key, and put it where only you an' me knows."

"The luck o' St. Patrick go wid you, me boy! for faix ye're a lad as I've tuk a suddint fancy to. And it's nobody'll get intil your room wid Judy McMulligin's good will, 'cept herself fur the thrifle o' cl'avin'. An' 'tain't often she bothers herself wid that, as ye well know."

"All right, Judy, dear. And the top o' the mornin' to ye. I'm off."

"An' remimber, the rent's due the night. Bear that in mind, ye heedless spalpeen. And away wid ye!"

"Reckon I'll have to bear it in pocket, as well as in mind," laughed Billy, in his reckless manner, as he left the room and passed out into the street.

It was not a highly attractive avenue. Narrow, dirty, full of strange smells and filth-loving children, lined on both sides with tumble-down houses, that leaned up against one another like drunkards, and so held each other up, it was not the place where a person of taste would have cared to make his residence.

Yet none of this hurt Billy Brick's feelings. He had been too long used to it, and the perfume of the gutters very little troubled his uneducated nose.

He went along whistling as gayly as if he owned the whole town, and a share of the river to boot.

Yet Billy had another reason for the careful locking of his room other than he had told his landlady. It was a reason connected with the treasure in charge.

He would have carried the key in his pocket for safe-keeping, only that Judy very strongly objected to any such idea. So he had compromised by putting the key under her especial care.

Billy Brick went his way that morning as happy as a lark, and with both eyes open for whatever might turn up.

The boy was ripe for anything that might serve to bring him in an honest penny. Holding horses, running errands, carrying parcels, picking up a job of laboring work here and there, sweeping out stores, helping boatmen—any and everything for which he was likely to get paid.

He had some few steady jobs, but most of his labor was chance work, and the amount of his earnings varied greatly week by week.

But there was an independence in this mode of life that just suited his reckless humor, and he had been so long used to doing what he pleased, and when he pleased, that he would have felt like a slave to come down to steady labor.

Yet, during the weeks that had elapsed since Grim's departure, there had been some things taking place of which Billy was not aware.

There had been strange eyes on him. His movements had been watched. He had been followed on several occasions. Evidently suspicion and danger were gathering around him.

Yet of all this he knew nothing.

He had been at first full of the mystery told him, and of the need of caution. But as time wore on that feeling subsided. It was not sure but that in some moment of recklessness and over confidence he might let out the story to some of his intimates. The boy was too young and heedless to be trusted with such a secret.

We have given these particulars as they are of importance in the conduct of our story. But to the boy, as he roamed along that morning wide-awake for a job, all was gay and rosy. There was not a cloud in the sky, or a shadow of danger in the air.

He had left far behind him the sorry region of his residence, and was in a far more respectable part of the city, when a gentleman rode rapidly up on horseback, drew rein near where the boy was standing, and sprung from his saddle to the pavement.

"Here, young fellow, hold my horse!" he cried in a tone of rude command.

Billy, who was as proud as a lord in his way, did not like this tone. But he had his living to make, and so contented himself with shrugging his shoulders and holding his tongue.

He caught the bridle which the gentleman carelessly flung him, and held the horse while the latter went into an adjoining house.

It was a quiet street. But few persons were passing. Billy walked the horse slowly up and down, while he awaited the return of his employer.

The gentleman came out again after some fifteen minutes. He took a coin from his pocket and flung it to the boy, as he might have flung a bone to a dog; and prepared to mount.

By this time the youngster's quick blood was up.

"Ain't this kind o' pickayone fur the size o' the job?" he asked, as he looked at the coin in his hand.

"What do you mean, you rascal?"

"Fifteen minutes fur a nickel ain't quite up to ownin' a silver mine."

"That will do, you young scoundrel! I'll switch your shoulders for any more gab," cried the gentleman, who was now in his saddle.

"And a counterfeit nickel at that. Didn't think you was one o' the sort to shove the queer."

"You confounded young reprobate, you will have it then!" cried the horseman, in a fury, as he raised his riding whip.

The boy stood without moving a muscle, with his eyes fixed steadily on the face of his opponent.

"I say it's a counterfeit," he repeated. "And jist you be keeful how you cavort with that there whip."

"You ugly imp of Satan, you threaten me, do you?"

The whip whistled in the air as the rider swung it around his shoulders. He seemed on the point of bringing it down on the back of the boy, whose face blazed with indignation, but who stood as motionless as a bronze statue.

But, at that moment another voice was heard, the voice of a woman:

"Don't dare strike that boy," it cried. "I have heard it all, and you have treated him badly. Don't you dare strike him!"

The gentleman looked at her with a sneering face.

"So ho!" he exclaimed. "The rat has a champion! I suppose I'd get myself in trouble now if I sliced his ears?"

"Perhaps you would," retorted the woman, indignantly. "I know the lad and will not see him ill-treated."

With another sneer the man lowered his whip, turned, and rode away, as if not caring to keep up the dispute.

Now for the first time the boy turned toward his protector.

He saw a young, well-dressed, and very good-looking lady, whose eyes were fixed on him with a peculiar glance.

"Miss Severn!" he exclaimed. "Didn't know as how it was you."

"It is lucky I happened to be near to protect you from the assault of that person," she replied.

"Him?" answered Billy. "That galoot? Hope you don't s'pose I was skeered 'bout him? Wish you'd jist left him 'lone. You'd seen fun when that whip come down. I ain't very big, Miss Severn, but I bet you lofty I'd ha' made the feathers fly."

She looked at the boy with a puzzled expression. He was better able to take care of himself than she had fancied.

"Why do you never come to see me any more?" she asked.

"Ain't had no 'casion," answered the boy, shortly.

"Come down this afternoon. I'll give you your supper, and I want a long talk with you."

"Go with you now if you want."

"No, thank you," she laughed. "I hardly think you are dressed well enough for my escort."

"Look fur me at grub time, then. I'll be there."

CHAPTER III.

THE WOMAN IN THE CASE.

SOME eight hours after the moment of his encounter with the equestrian found Billy Brick in a very different situation. He was seated at a table covered with a very appetizing supper, in the kitchen of a mansion of some style in the lower section of the city.

The boy himself, with his saucy, sunburned face, his shaggy, half-combed hair, his ragged coat, two sizes too large for him, his neck with a soiled necktie knotted loosely around it, his greasy hat flung carelessly on a side table, seemed entirely out of place in that situation.

But little did all that disturb him. He felt himself, in his independent soul, as good as a king, and if Billy had been dropped down in the center of a palace he would have made himself at home within two minutes after landing.

"Jolly, but Miss Severn does know how ter tickle a feller's insides," declared Billy, with a laugh of contentment. "Ain't had sich a gay swing at vittals this six months."

"Don't b'lieve I'd do better if I had a free blow at the Continental kitchen. Them mashed 'taters is better nor ice cream on toast, and lawsee, ain't that chicken gravy jist prime!"

But, all good things come to an end, and such was the case with Billy Brick's supper, when nothing but bones and empty dishes were left on the table.

"There. Reckon I'm good fur a week," he declared as he rose, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and rubbed his hand clean on his coat.

"Now where's Miss Severn? S'pose she wants ter git some 'vice 'bout investments, or some sich financial bizness. Don't mind givin' her a pint, bein's she's been so jolly prime."

A laugh of amusement echoed his words. He turned, to see the pretty face of his entertainer, looking at him from the doorway.

"I knew you were a street philosopher," she said. "But, I was not aware you were a financier. Come this way, my lad. It is your good I want to talk about, not my own."

"Me? Oh, I'm good as wheat, till the next time I'm hungry," replied Billy, with a satisfied air, as he followed the young lady into a small room adjoining.

He took a seat at Miss Severn's suggestion, stuck his hat between his knees, and waited to hear from her.

"You have done more than one job for me, my boy, and done them well," she began. "I

am interested in you, for I think you are an honest, well-meaning, and friendless youth."

"Ain't got many friends 'cept my ten fingers, and same number o' toes," answered Billy. "Been kinder lonely ever since Daddy Grim stepped out."

"Daddy Grim? Who is he?"

"He's an old nutmeg grater as has been lookin' arter me ever since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. A royal old coon, too, though you kin bet he kin be as sour as pickled eysters, when things go criss-cross."

"You call him daddy. I thought you were an orphan. You have told me so."

"He's only a second-hand daddy—'lected to fill the vacancy," explained Billy. "Reckon, somehow, as he knowed my real parients, 'ca'ze he's let out somethin' 'bout me bein' a mystery. But that ain't tellin's, Miss Severn. Only somehow that supper o' yourn has 'iled my tongue."

"You can confide in me, my boy," she remarked. "I brought you here to-day to talk with you on your future prospects. I don't like to see a smart, well-built, capable lad like you, who are almost a man, passing your life like a street vagrant. It is high time you were beginning life in earnest."

"Them's jist Daddy Grim's sentiments," rejoined Billy. "He told me as much jist afore he pegged out."

"He 'pegged out,' and 'stepped out.' What do you mean by such queer expressions? Is he dead?"

"Him dead? Not much! No more nor a seasoned hickory log. He's gone West on biz. Dunno where or what, but don't 'spect ter see him back for two or three years."

A change came over Miss Severn's face, an expression of sudden satisfaction. It seemed almost as if she had been fishing for information.

"That's rather rough on you," she remarked, with a laugh. "To lose your oldest friend. Yet I suppose he will write to you?"

"Don't 'spect nothin' o' the sort. Don't know where he's goin' no more nor the man in the moon, and he didn't ax me fur my post-office 'dress."

"That was very shabby treatment."

"No it weren't. He's sound oak, Daddy Grim is. Didn't vamose 'thout leavin' me— But there goes my 'iled-up tongue ag'in. Reckon I'd best shet down brakes on that there trotter."

"Why, my lad, if there is a secret left in your charge, or if the old gentleman has left anything of importance in your care, it is your business to be as still as the grave. Never speak of it, even to me, whom you know to be your friend."

"That's jist 'bout what he told me," admitted Billy. "I weren't never to wag my jaw-bone 'bout it. Not as I'm afeard o' you, Miss Severn. But 'tain't safe."

Miss Severn turned her face toward the window, to conceal the peculiar expression that came upon it.

When she looked back again at the boy there was an aspect of warm benevolence and interest upon her countenance.

"Well, I declare," she said, "this is growing interesting and exciting. When I asked you to come here to-day I did not dream that there was a romance in the air."

She drew her chair closer up in front of Billy's, and laid her white hands on the boy's knees, while she looked earnestly in his face.

"You have got me quite excited," she declared, with a nervous little laugh. "I don't want to know your secrets, but I don't think it was fair in Mr. Grim to go away and leave you in danger."

"Reckon I can toe my line 'thout help," remarked Billy, awkwardly. He was a little disturbed and overcome by the vision of that pretty, smiling face so near his own.

"A friendless orphan like you in danger? No, no, you are in no position to take care of yourself. It was a burning shame to give you any dangerous charge. I'll tell you, my boy," she earnestly continued. "Let me befriended you. Bring me this dangerous article, whatever it is. Let me keep it for you. You can have no safe place to conceal it. Bring it here secretly, and your enemies will not dream of seeking for it in my charge."

The boy was in the lures of the siren.

For the moment judgment, caution and sense were charmed out of existence, and he was completely under the power of the fair and subtle woman before him.

"You're just an angel, Miss Severn," he declared warmly. "I am kinder nervous 'bout it. I'll giv in. Ain't got no fit hidin'-place round my diggin's, an' if you'd be so kind as to take keer of it."

"Why, of course I will."

"Then I'll fotch you the box to-night. But, mind you, Miss Severn, it's got to be watched as close as a mince pie 'long side of a rat-hole. It's terrible important."

She laughed gayly at his simile, and struck his cheek familiarly with her fingers.

"I'll have to play the cat then, I suppose."

"It's only till I'm twenty one, Miss Severn. Then— But I reckon I'd best shut up."

"I judge you had," she laughed. "You must hold your tongue better, or your secret will be out. But, what you have said will be safe with me. Bring the box here, and we'll see if it gives you any more trouble."

The conversation between the two strangely-assorted friends continued for some time longer, though now on indifferent topics. Miss Severn carefully avoiding any reference to the box.

She was giving him advice as to his future life, and promised to use her influence to get him into a profitable situation.

"I'll fotch the thing to-night," he said mysteriously, as he left the door. "Bout ten o'clock, if 'tain't too late."

"That hour will do very well, Billy Brick. Mercy, what a name that is!" she laughed. "You ought to change it. It is best to come late. But be very careful you are not seen nor followed."

She held out her hand and clasped his brown paw as warmly as if she had been his best friend.

The lad's head was in a maze as he walked away.

The feeling's of a man were all astir in his young frame, and the love magic which the alluring woman had flung around him worked like a fire in his veins.

He was not himself as he made his way home. What ailed him he could not have told, but he seemed walking on air.

He was to return at ten that night. But the two or three hours intervening were as long to him as that many months. The house was too small to hold him, and it was not yet nine when he found himself on the street again, with the precious box hidden carefully under his coat.

He looked around him heedfully as he passed through the street. The possession of that treasure made him wary, and all his old sharpness returned as he watched for signs of peril.

Yet no such signs appeared. There was evidently no foe on his track.

As he walked along a neighboring clock struck. He counted the strokes up to nine.

"Jist an hour ahead o' time," he said, discontentedly. "Wonder what's got inter my wisdom-box? Guess I'll have to bang fire a bit, or Miss Severn 'll think I'm no better nor a fool."

He changed his course and walked through street after street, trying to kill his spare hour.

His steps took nearly the same course they had followed that morning, and he soon found himself in the locality where he had held the gentleman's horse.

Thinking of that incident, and feeling a little tired, the wandering boy halted before the house into which the horseman had entered, and squatted down in the corner between the house and the high flight of steps.

Here he sat musing for several minutes. For the first time the doubt came to him whether he had been altogether wise in neglecting old Grim's strict injunctions, and not only revealing his secret to another, but even agreeing to put his valued treasure in other hands.

"But it's Miss Severn. An' she's jist as sweet as strained honey," he declared. "Queer if she isn't safer nor I am myself."

His meditations were interrupted at that moment by the opening of the house door. Voices that seemed familiar to him came from it. Two persons came out on the steps.

The house, as we have said, was the one which the horseman had entered that morning.

This fact led the listening boy to recognize the voice of the person speaking. It was undoubtedly that of his assailant.

But the other voice he had heard just as the door opened—who's was that? It was a woman's voice—that was all he was sure of, yet his veins tingled as if he had been struck by an arrow.

"Very well played, Polly. Remarkably well played," said the man, with a laugh of satisfaction. "I knew you could do it, though. It would be hard to find a match for you in your special art. You mesmerized him, eh?"

"He left me with his head all in a swim," came the laughing reply, in tones that went like an electric shock through the listener's nerves. "He will bring it. I have no fear about that."

"It is odd," was the reply, "after the old man has out-matched us for years, that the apple should fairly tumble into our hands. But the game was very neatly played—the whip-trick, your indignant protest, and all."

The eyes of the unseen listener were widely opening. He drew his breath with a hissing sound between his teeth. Only by a strong effort could he keep himself down in his covert.

"He is only an unfledged boy, William," came the woman's answer. There could be no mistake now—it was the voice of Miss Severn. "It would be odd if a pair of old actors like you and me couldn't checkmate a street vagrant. As for the casket—"

"There's millions in it," he hastily answered. "Be wary as the serpent till it gets into your hands."

"Trust me," she briefly answered.

She walked away, with those words.

The gentleman returned into the house.

The boy remained dazed in his covert. For fifteen minutes not a muscle moved, though a whole river of thoughts seemed rushing through his brain. Then he rose slowly to his feet.

"Reckon the unfledged boy is beginnin' to get his feathers on," he muttered. "We'll see, William and Polly, which is goin' to be the top dog in this fight."

CHAPTER IV.

THE LITTLE DOG IN THE FIGHT.

It might naturally be supposed, after the events just described, that Miss Polly Severn would have waited in vain for the youthful victim of her lures.

And yet, strange to say, shortly after the hour appointed Billy Brick made his appearance at the door of her residence, with the bulging corners of a box lifting the waist of his coat.

It is hard to follow the vagaries of a boy's fancy. We would not have expected this of a lad as sharp as our street Arab. Yet, there he was. We must stick to the facts, no matter what we consider most natural.

Miss Severn opened the door herself, with an eagerness in her face which she quickly repressed.

"Well!" she cried, with a gay laugh. "Here you are good twenty minutes late. Is that the way you keep your appointments with a lady?"

"Couldn't help it," explained Billy. "Got stopped by a dog-fight. You dunno what gay larks there is in a dog-fight. Jist wanted ter see if ther little dog would whip."

"And did he?"

"You kin bet he did. You kin jist bet yer bottom dollar on that. Got the box here, Miss Severn. Dunno what's in it, but it's mighty vally'ble, Daddy Grim says."

"The box! What box? Oh, yes! I declare I had almost forgot. I promised to take care of a box for you. Do come in, my boy. No one must see you give it to me."

Billy followed her into the house, with an odd smile on his begrimed countenance. Entering the parlor he took from under his coat the object that was there hidden, and laid it on the table.

It was a square walnut box, with brass lock and hinges, certainly not the one which he had received from Daddy Grim, though of about the same shape.

The subtle woman looked at it with hungry eyes. Her fingers twitched nervously, as if she had difficulty in restraining herself from seizing it in triumph.

Yet there was a very different expression on the face she turned to the boy.

"So you would sooner see a dog-fight than see me?" she queried, with a smile that disturbed Billy's nerves. "Well, if that isn't a compliment!"

"But I kalkerlated ter see both," replied the lad very earnestly. "If you'd only see'd the little dog a-wrastlin' with the big 'un I bet you'd 'a' stopped, too. And my, oh! didn't the little 'un whop the big 'un! It were jist good fur sore eyes."

"Ain't I good for sore eyes, Billy?" she asked, taking the boy's cheeks between her hands, and holding his face close up to hers. "Ain't I better worth looking at than a fighting dog?"

"Dunno," he said, stoutly. "The dog were game. But you are jist as pretty as a pictur', Miss Severn; an' jist as sweet as sugar candy; an' you make me feel jist's if I was in Heaven, playin' tag with the little angels."

"There! I must really kiss you for that." She pressed her lips on the not uncomely, but not too clean lips of her victim.

Billy's head swam as she pushed him away with a gay laugh. He had passed through a new experience in his young life.

"And I'll take the best of care of the box. You shall never have any trouble about it again. Trust me for that."

Billy looked at her with a queer soberness of expression.

"Guess I'll be goin', Miss Severn," he remarked.

"Dear me! you are in a hurry to go. Are you after another dog-fight?"

"No. 'Tain't that," replied the boy.

"What is it, then?"

"I'll tell you, if you won't get mad."

"Tell me, then. I'll promise to keep in my very best temper."

"It's 'cause I'm afeard o' you."

"Afeard of me? Why, what ails the boy?"

"I'm jist afeard o' you. If you'd kiss me ag'in I reckon I'd howl. Dunno how 't is, but couldn't never stand much o' that. Ain't got the nerve. Guess I'd best vamoose."

Miss Severn fell back on the sofa in a perfect breeze of laughter. It seemed as if she never could stop. She broke out again and again every time she fixed her eyes on the queer, sober look of the boy. At length she sprang impulsively to her feet.

"Come," she cried merrily. "I think, too, you had better go. You will be the death of me if you stay here much longer. You've been vaccinated, my boy; and it has taken, strongly."

"Went clear in to the bones," averred Billy. "Kinder set my ribs dancin'. Take another dog-fight to fetch me to."

In a minute or two more he was on the street, the fair tempter standing in the doorway and looking after him with an expression of mingled amusement and triumph.

She might have felt differently had she seen Billy's face just then or heard his muttered words.

"Ice cream and pan-cakes, but weren't that nice!" he declared. "But, if that sweet milk don't go sour 'fore we're many days older, then this coon don't know nothin' 'bout huckleberries."

All the way home the boy kept bursting into little short bits of laughter. Here and there he paused and broke into a dance on the pavement. Some well of fun seemed to have burst out within him.

"S'pose 'tain't fair ter take somethin' fur nothin'," he muttered. "But, that there hoss-back rooster tried ter shove the queer on me, an' I reckon I've got a right ter giv' him his change fur a counterfeit nickell!"

"Wonder if Miss Severn won't square up that kiss by pullin' my hair out next time? Reckon some'ow as she'll try it on."

"Ye're kapin' bad hours, me boy," declared Judy, as her tenant entered and looked for his key. "What ye been doin' abroad at this hour o' the night, avick?"

"Sowin' wild clover, Judy. Reckon I'll go to bed, and wait till it comes up."

Ten minutes after he was as sound asleep as an oak log.

Billy's wild clover was destined to come up ere many days had passed. And he was quite likely to reap some of the crop himself.

Two days after the era of the events just narrated, several persons were gathered in a room of the house of Miss Polly Severn.

One of them was the horseman whom we have already introduced to the reader. There were two other gentlemen present, in addition to the lady.

On a table before them lay the box which the confiding boy had intrusted to his much promising lady friend.

The whole party were smiling with hope and satisfaction as they looked down on this object, which seemed of high value in their eyes.

"Are you certain that the lost casket fell into Grim's hands?" asked one.

"There is no question about it. Jerry is ready to swear to it."

"But he may have transferred some of the contents."

"Not he. He has been watched like a hawk for years."

"Then we have a fortune at our fingers' ends?"

"Well, I should rather imagine! And no baby of a pile, either. I would never have given the time I have spent on this for any trifle, you can be sure o' that."

"You talk too much," declared Miss Severn, impatiently. "I have some interest in this affair myself. And I calculate to be paid well for my share in it. So open the box, and let us see what we have."

They had already tried various keys upon it without effect. It was necessary to force the cover open. For this purpose one of the party

had just provided himself with a hammer and chisel.

They all gathered closely round, with eager eyes and excited manner, as the man with the chisel pried at the close lid, and drove the sharp steel deeper in with his hammer.

There finally came a sharp, rending crack. The screws gave way, and the lock was torn bodily out of the wood. The loosened box-lid flew wide open with a jerk.

They pressed still more ardently forward, and bent their eyes, with burning eagerness, on the contents of the mysterious box.

Then, there was a sudden change.

Two of the men grew pale. The third became red as blood in the face, while a ferocious oath broke from his lips.

Polly Severn gave vent to a half-scream, tottered back, and fell in limp fashion into a chair behind her.

If they had beheld a deadly serpent coiled up in the box, ready to dart out his poisonous fangs, there could not have been more signs of consternation.

What was it they saw?

The papers for which they looked were certainly not there.

At first sight the box appeared to be empty. But a closer look showed that a sheet of white paper covered its bottom.

On this sheet was a rather rude drawing of a dog-fight, between what might have passed for a large bull-dog, and a shaggy rat terrier.

But the big dog was on his back, with his heels in the air, and his mouth open, gasping for breath.

And the terrier was on top, with his teeth in the bull-dog's throat, shaking him as if he had caught a rat.

The drawing was very rude, yet it had been made by a hand with some natural talent, and its meaning was very clear.

Beside it was the figure of a ragged boy, with his thumb on his nose and his fingers extended in the air, while from his grinning face came the following words:

"The little dog wins! How's that for high? Kinder rough on the bull-pup; but you bet the terrier's all thar, all the time."

After the moment of consternation a host of oaths, threats, and fierce exclamations broke out in the room.

The man named William fairly danced with rage.

Miss Severn sprang up, after a moment, her face blazing, her eyes flashing.

"The miserable, impudent, ugly little street rat!" she ejaculated, as she snatched the satirical drawing from the box. "And to think what a ridiculous fool I made of myself! Even going so far as to kiss his dirty face! This is the dog-fight he kept talking about. He said he had stopped to see a dog-fight, and the little dog won, drat his ugly picture!"

"It seems to me he was not far out," replied the third gentleman, who had kept somewhat cool. "So far the little dog has won. I tell you what, cute as you were, the boy has been too much for you. We've got no baby to play with in this game."

"I'll tear his eyes out, the audacious reprobate!" screamed the baffled woman, who was more angered at the insult to her charms than in regard to the humbug of the box.

"I'll teach him a lesson that he will not forget as long as he lives!"

"But you must catch your bird before you can put salt on his tail. See here, gentlemen, you may as well stop your swearing, and Miss Severn may as well take her defeat mildly. The boy is not the fool you took him to be—that is the long and short of it."

"Well, I should rather calculate not," declared Harry. "Talk about having your eye-teeth cut! He's got his filed down sharp as needles."

"But he has the real casket. I am sure of that."

"So am I!" declared Miss Severn.

"Very well, then. It is plain we have no common opponent to deal with. We must take new measures with this boy. That casket must be ours."

"It shall be, if he has to be settled for good," declared William.

"Then let us talk it over. We have a very hard nut to crack. I promise you that."

The four conspirators settled down into a long conference.

CHAPTER V.

FUN AMONG THE ARABS.

As the case stood, Billy Brick had the best of the fight. The rat terrier had taken the starch out of his opponents.

But it was only through sheer good luck and reckless dash. The real truth of the matter was that he had sold the best half of his game to his enemies, and was likely to pay well for his loose tongue.

Daddy Grim's injunctions had been forgotten. The villains knew that the treasure casket was in the boy's possession.

He had now before him a long fight with shrewd, powerful and pitiless opponents, who would take any means, good or bad, to gain their ends.

Time passed rapidly on from the date of the events last described. The days lengthened into weeks, and the weeks into months. Yet all was still and silent as the grave.

The conspirators failed to show their hands. No sign of their existence came to the boy. It seemed as if they had given up their scheme.

Yet the serpent is most dangerous when it is lurking in ambush. It is but waiting to throw its victim off his guard, to dart into him its deadly fangs.

If this was the game it worked well with Billy. His naturally reckless temper made him soon forget danger that he did not see. Before a month had passed he had half forgotten that he had any enemies in the world.

He had been sharp and wide-awake enough for some time after his adventure with Polly Severn. For a full week he had kept a keen eye on her house, and on that of his enemy, the horseman.

But at the end of that time he had discovered, much to his surprise and disgust, that he was watching a pair of empty nests.

The birds had flown.

Both houses were empty. This he only discovered when new people moved in, the houses being rented furnished.

Billy tried to learn from these new people something about the former tenants. But they knew nothing about them.

He then inquired of the house agent, whose address he had learned.

This person told him that the gentleman, Mr. William Smithers, had left the city, and gone to Florida to engage in the orange business.

As for the lady, Miss Mary Severn, she had moved north, and was going to spend a year with her aunt in Vermont.

Under these circumstances they had ordered him to rent out their houses furnished to new tenants.

Billy turned away whistling.

"So the bull pup's got his rations; and the tarrier's the boss dog in the scrimmage," he ejaculated. "Lawsee, if they ain't tuk water quicker'n I ever see'd! Ain't got as much back-bone as a slice o' watermelon, them coons."

If Billy had known one thing he might not have felt so confident. For he would have known that the house agent, who was so obliging in giving him information, had an ax to grind.

For this person, Jesse Johnson by the name on his sign, was no other than the cool member of the gang who had been present at the opening of the box.

It was his object to throw the boy off the track, and he had well succeeded.

Satisfied that everything was safe Billy spent his days in his old light-hearted and rollicking fashion, with no sign that he had a care in the world.

As we have said three months passed in this quiet way. The boy retained his room at Judy Mulligan's. And the box remained safe where he had hidden it.

So far he had hit no steady employment, but roamed about in his old reckless way, from job to job.

Full half his time was spent in enjoyment. Thus, on a day at the end of the three months, Billy was on an open lot in the lower city, with a group of boys mostly younger than himself.

They were a sharp and ragged crew, mostly bootblacks and newspaper venders.

What occupied them now was one of Billy's favorite amusements, a dog-fight.

Both the dogs were curs, worthless canine vagrants, hardly worth the stray bones on which they lived.

Yet they were game to the back-bone, and fought as pluckily as the best thoroughbred could have done.

The boys were wild at the spirit with which the curs snarled, bit, and tussled, and came up again to the music without a sign of a back-down.

"Go it, yaller belly!" yelled one urchin, dancing with delight.

"Pelt in, bloody nose!" roared another. "Hike on, game pup!"

"The little 'un's my dorg, fer a pile."

"I bet on the sotter."

The boys crowded up enthusiastically, each cheering his favorite. There was getting to be warm blood among them.

"What you scrougin' me fur? Got as much right here as you."

"Dry up, top-knot, or I'll bust yer b'iler."

"You can't do it, Billy Brick. 'Tain't in your bones to do it."

"'Tain't, eh?" cried Billy, eying his opponent disdainfully.

The boy was larger than himself, but not so well knit.

"No, 'tain't. If you guv me any more o' your slack, I'll slap yer mouth."

"Go ahead, Bandy, if yer want ter see blue lightnin'," retorted Billy, in sneering good humor. "Here's my 'tater-mill. Slap it."

He held up his mouth with such a tantalizing grin to his opponent, that the latter took him at his word, and brought his hand down on it with a sounding slap.

The next moment he wished he hadn't.

For the good humor in Billy's eyes suddenly changed to a flash of fire.

With a quick movement Billy stooped down, caught the unprepared boy around the legs with a powerful clutch, and rose with him in his arms.

A strong send, and the astonished lad was hurled in on top of the two tussling dogs, bringing out a perfect chorus of howls from their scared throats.

Thinking this was a new dog in the fight, both of them sunk their sharp teeth into the boy's hide, and it wasn't long before there was a new howl added to the chorus.

As for the ring of wild young rascals, they danced and yelled with delight at the sight, while Billy stood looking on with a grim curl of the lips.

"Like ter take another slap?" he queried, as the howling boy scrambled away from the dogs' teeth. "Won't charge nothin', if yer feel like peggin' in."

The discomfited boy looked up so sheepishly that the others burst out into another roar.

"Hey, there! What is the matter with you fellows?" demanded a sharp voice from the edge of the pavement. "I've called you twice now."

At this demand the boys turned toward the street. They saw a trotting-carriage drawn up by the sidewalk, occupied by two men, one of whom had called:

"What is the matter there?"

"Only a dog-fight," answered one of the vagrants. "But it's jist jolly. Want to come in?"

"Well, not just now," said the gentleman, with a short laugh. "Who is the smartest boy in this crowd? That's what I want to know."

"Guess you'd best light on Billy Brick. You'd say so if you see'd him guv a felder to Bandy Bones jist now."

"I saw it," laughed the man. "Step up this way, Billy. Can I trust you to do an errand for me?"

"Reckon," answered Billy, shortly. "If you fork out lively 'nough."

"I'll give a half-dollar, if you'll promise to be prompt and quick."

"Tumble it out. I'm yer boss."

"I have forgotten something important. I want a note taken at once to this address. Can you read writin'?"

"Should smile if I couldn't. Didn't go ten years to ther University fur nothin'."

"I see you are wide awake—I can trust you. Very well. Take this note to the address written on it. Wait for an answer, and bring it to me promptly at the Lamb Tavern. Do you know where that is?"

"You bet."

"Then don't let the grass grow under your feet."

"Ain't yer furgot somethin'?"

"What's that?"

"The 'ile to grease my shin-bones."

"What does the boy mean?"

"He means the money," suggested the other gentleman.

"Oh! Wants cash in advance, eh? That ain't my way."

"Ain't trust and trust a good game?" queried the independent boy.

"Very well. Here is half your fee. I will give you the balance when you bring the answer."

"That's old hokey. Guv me the letter. You kin bet no grass won't grow under my toes. Not outer the brick pavement, anyhow, if I take a year."

With this last dig the boy turned, and was off

at a speed that would easily bring him to his destination in a half-hour.

He did not notice the look with which the two men followed his active form, as he loped away with the speed of an Indian scout.

"A well-set youngster," said one, with an admiring glance.

"And likely to be well laid," rejoined the other, with a queer smile, as he touched the whip to the horse.

The boys, who had been highly interested in this episode, now turned back to the dog-fight.

But the curs had taken the opportunity to escape, both of them having had a full dose of the fight.

Bandy Bones was the only interesting figure left, and he was busy examining his hurts with a very rueful countenance.

Meanwhile, the young messenger pushed sharply along on his errand, very well satisfied to earn a half-dollar in an hour's work.

The address which he had been given was a street far down-town, on the outskirts of the city, in fact.

On reading it, the alert messenger found that it was in a very thinly-settled district, the house he was in search of standing alone in its square.

It was a large, somewhat gloomy-looking mansion, surrounded by a yard, and a high fence.

Paying little heed to this, the active lad opened the yard gate, strode up the marble steps, and gave a hard pull to the bell.

A servant quickly came to the door.

"A letter here," declared Billy. "Wants an answer at top speed. Right, ain't it? That man lives here?"

"Yes. Come in. I will take it to him."

"Be lively 'bout it, then. The chap as sent it hired me fer a two-legged telegraph."

"Then you'd best deliver it yourself. Come in. I will show you to Mr. Smithers's room."

Billy readily obeyed. That seemed all fair and square.

"Follow me up-stairs," said the man. "He has his office on the third floor."

The boy followed unsuspectingly.

They soon reached the third floor of the house. The servant led along a narrow entry to a room at its rear end.

He opened the door of the room and stepped in. Billy stood in the doorway.

"He is not here," said the man, in a tone of surprise. "He must be down-stairs. Sit down. I will look him up."

"I'll wait here," answered the messenger, leaning easily against the door-post.

The servant looked at him for an instant with a peculiar expression. Then he turned shortly on his heel.

"Wait then," he said, as he walked away.

He was gone for several minutes.

When he reappeared at the head of the stairs it was with a stealthy step.

He looked along the entry. Billy was no longer in the doorway. He had evidently gone into the room.

With a look of satisfaction, and the light tread of a fox, the man glided rapidly along the carpeted floor.

Reaching the door, which opened outward, in a moment he had slammed it to, and turned the key in the lock.

"Just wait there, my sharp lad, till Mr. Smithers comes. He won't be long, maybe."

Laughing at his own wit, he turned quickly away, without waiting for an answer from his entrapped prisoner.

CHAPTER VI.

JUDY MULLIGAN AND THE SEARCH-WARRANT.

IN a lower room of the house into which Billy Brick had been entrapped, sat two men. A glance is enough to show that they were two of the conspirators, William Smithers, and Jesse Johnson the house-agent.

The third of the party, Harry Tompkins, was he who had sent the boy on his dangerous errand.

After a long silence the villains had shown their hands, and made a successful move.

The boy was in their power. It remained to get possession of the mysterious box. Then it might be possible that a certain street boy would disappear from the ranks of society.

These men were not apt to let the life of a vagrant boy stand in the way of their schemes. They had heard the report of the servant with immense satisfaction, and had since then had an hour's earnest conference.

They were just ready to bring their conversation to an end.

"The little idiot has tumbled neatly into our net," said Smithers, with great enjoyment.

"He's a sharp young rat, but he is hardly fit to cope against old hands."

"Hardly," rejoined the other, as he buttoned his coat and took his hat. "I will be off at once. My plan is well laid, and cannot fail. I don't fancy that you will let the boy play any sharp games on you."

"What do you mean? Escape from that room?"

"Yes."

"Do you take me for a fool? If he escapes, it will only be to one place."

"Where is that?"

"The place from which no one ever comes back to tell tales."

Jesse slightly shuddered at the cold-blooded malignity of his companion's tone.

"Don't talk about that," he muttered.

"What must be, must be. But the fewer words the better."

"You ain't growing chicken-hearted?" demanded Smithers, with a sneer. "Remember what there is in this, old fellow. Have you forgotten the Sterling estate?"

"No. And it is something to stop a boy's breathing organs for. But you are so horribly suggestive. You always give me a nervous spasm. There. It is all gone now. I'll be off."

Pulling down his hat, with a resolute look on his face, he left the room.

He might follow the tricky house-agent on his path, but it will be better to go ahead of him to his destination.

This was the house of Judy Mulligan.

That good lady was occupied in her household chores, and singing to herself an air of an old Irish ballad, when a loud knock came upon her front door.

Without waiting for her to open it the person knocking opened the door and walked in.

There were two persons in fact. One of them bore the sly and tricky face of Jesse Johnson. The other was a more roughly-dressed fellow, with a bull-dog face.

The house-agent looked at Judy, whose face bore no pleased expression.

"Are you the mistress of this house?" he asked.

"Faix an I fancied I was, beyant this moment," she declared, placing her arms akimbo, with a spiteful look in her eyes. "But whin folks walk in widout so much as 'by yer l'ave,' it sames a'most as if I'd abdicated."

"Oh, keep your temper, good woman. The law gives us the right to open any door."

"Good woman, is it? I'd have ye know that I'm none o' yer good woman. An if ye came here callin' me out o' me name I'll take the poker to ye as sure as my name's Judy Mulligan."

"There, there, there!" cried Jesse impatiently. "I'll go back and knock if it will put you in a good-humor. But we are officers of the law, Mistress Mulligan. We are here on legal business, and will have no obstructions put in our way."

"Of the law?" she repeated, with a show of uneasiness. "Sure an I've done nothin' in me mortal life to offend law an justice. An I'm obleeged to think as ye've sadly mistook the house."

"There's no mistake about it, my good lady, if you like that better than good woman. There is nothing against yourself, but you are harboring a thief. You have in your house a boy, one Billy Brick?"

"Him a thafe? I'll niver belave it! Not if you got on yer marrowbones, an swore the skies green!"

"It is the fact, whether you believe it or not. And we have no time to stand here parleying. The young villain has stolen a valuable box from the jewelry store of Jones & Wilson. We have reason to believe it is concealed in your house, and we are here to search for it."

"He's no thafe! It's not in the boy! I've my house wid yer lies."

"We will leave it with the box," sneered Jesse. "Save your words, Mrs. Mulligan. Where is your boarder?"

"Sorrah the one o' me knows. Ye mought as well ax me where's the man in the moon."

"Then show us to his room. We must and will search it."

Judy looked at her pair of visitors for a moment, as if not quite sure what was best to do under the circumstances.

Then she suddenly turned on her heel and led the way to the stairs.

"Folly me," she said. "I've nothin' to con-sale."

They followed her to the third floor of her sorry house. Here she paused before the door of a small rear apartment.

"Ye're here now," she said. With a look of satisfaction, Jesse turned the handle of the door. It failed to yield to his touch.

"It is locked," he remarked. "Sure an' I didn't say as it wasn't." "Then let us have the key. At once, woman!"

"The key, is it?" "Yes, the key," he cried, impatiently. "An' it's not in the door, thin?" "No. Can't you see for yourself?" "Thin, I'm sadly afeard the gossoon has it. He's sometimes very quare about that key," she replied, with great innocence.

"Oh! break the door open!" cried the rough man, now speaking for the first time. "Can't you see that the woman is chaffing you?"

"An' who might yerself be, avick?" queried Judy, facing him.

"I am an officer of the law. And I've had enough of this fooling."

"An officer of the law! Faix, an' ye look more loike a private of the law. An' ye know so little about the law as to think ye can break open doors at yer pleasure? If ye'll take the advice of an old 'oman, as is not quite a grane-horn, ye'll not be afther touching that door."

"And why not, madam?" demanded Jesse, angrily.

"Bekase this is my house. And my house is my castle. Ye've shown no s'arch-warrant. An' if ye touch stick or stone on these premises widout a reg'lar s'arch-warrant, I'll have the law av ye, as sure as I was born in old Ireland. An' ye kin put that in yer pipe an' smoke it."

The two men looked at one another. "Don't heed her blather!" cried the rough fellow. "Say the word, and I'll have the door open in a jiffy."

"Ye will, ye omadhoun? We'll see about that!" exclaimed Judy, as she flew to a window that overlooked the street and threw it up. "If you lay yer dirty paws on that door widout showin' your authority, I'll rouse the neighborhood. An', be jabers! I'll have ye tossed out the windy fur bloody burglars!"

The men looked at one another again. They had evidently met their match.

A whispered conference took place between them. Then Jesse advanced.

"You are giving us unnecessary trouble," he averred. "The warrant has been issued, but we have not brought it with us. You have no right to obstruct the process of the law."

"When I want instruction in the rights of an American citizen, I'll come tell ye," retorted Judy viciously. "An' if ye want to know the power there is in an Irishwoman's tongue, ye'll touch that door ayant ye. Faix an' I'm not quite as ignorant as ye take me."

Her assailants were evidently baffled. They conferred again.

"You have the right to demand a sight of the warrant," acknowledged Jesse. "As we have forgotten to bring it with us, I will return and get it. But while I am gone this gentleman must be left on guard in the house. We can run no risk of having the stolen articles removed."

"It's no confederate o' thaves I am," declared Judy a little mollified. "And I'd be the last to obstruct the reg'lar process o' the law. The gentleman kin have one o' me best cheers at the foot o' the stairs. It's not fur a dacent Irishwoman to obstruct justice."

This suggestion was satisfactory to the assumed law officers. In a few minutes more Jesse had departed, and his rough-faced comrade was seated at the foot of the narrow stairway, completely cutting off access to the upper portion of the house.

"An' it's not to lave ye widout comfort I'd be," remarked Judy. "If ye'd loike a pull at me bit of a pipe I don't moind fillin' it fur ye."

"No, thank you," the fellow laughed. "But I'll smoke a cigar, if you'll bring me a light." Judy did so, and then returned to her culinary labors in the kitchen.

She was thoroughly satisfied. She had fully asserted her rights as a householder. But she knew enough about the law not to go too far. She would not venture to hinder the serving of a legal search-warrant.

As for Billy Brick she could not easily be brought to believe him a thief.

The minutes passed away, over Judy in the kitchen, and her smoking visitor in the hall.

A full hour and more passed by before Jesse Johnson returned.

This time he knocked, and waited till the mistress of the house opened the door.

"Now, Mrs. Mulligan," he remarked, with

ill-concealed triumph. "You can have no further objection. I have here a search-warrant, duly signed and sealed. This gentleman, who is a magistrate's constable, will show it to you."

The person of whom he spoke entered the house behind him, and showed the good lady an important-looking document, while he began to read with great dignity.

Mrs. Mulligan listened in some awe at the long-jointed legal terns.

"That is satisfactory, gentlemen," she said. "I'll put ye to no further trouble."

"Very well, then. We must force the door." "There's little occasion for that. I remember now where the gossoon left the key."

Jesse stared, and growled under his breath. He had evidently been humbugged.

There was a look of sarcastic triumph on the woman's face that rolled him.

Yet, with an effort, he kept quiet, and took the proffered key without a word.

"Come," he briefly remarked.

The guard rose from his chair as they entered the hall, and threw down the remnant of his cigar.

"I can vouch that no one has entered or gone out," he declared.

"Then all is right," rejoined Jesse.

He led the way up-stairs, followed by his two companions, while Mrs. Mulligan brought up the rear, with a very peculiar smile upon her face.

Reaching the door of the boy's room, Jesse handed the key to the constable.

"It is you that represent the law," he said. "You had better open the door."

The latter did so without hesitation, and advanced into the room, followed by the other.

Yet the whole party came to a sudden halt, with an exclamation of astonishment.

For in the only chair which the sorry room contained, sat no less a personage than Billy Brick, with his hat cocked well over on his left ear, his thumbs in his vest arm-holes, and his sauciest look of independence on his face.

"By the Lord Harry!" cried Jesse, in a spasm of fright. "Is it a ghost? It is impossible that—" He quite broke down and stood trembling and staring at the figure before him.

"Solid oak, I reckon," answered the boy. "If you've got any doubts, jist put yer finger between my teeth, and I'll try my best to convince you whether it's a ghost or a human critter."

CHAPTER VII.

THE ADVENTURES OF BILLY BRICK.

BEFORE proceeding to describe what followed the strange discovery in Judy Mulligan's house, we must go back a step in our story and relate the adventures of Billy Brick.

An hour or two before he had been, to all seeming, safely locked up in a prison room. It seemed impossible to get out of the house into which he had been entrapped, and equally impossible for him to get past the guard on Judy Mulligan's stair, and enter his room.

Yet there he was. It was a remarkable "transformation scene," whose workings we must explain, for the reader's benefit.

In fact, just about the time that Jesse Johnson was making his surprising discovery, William Smithers, at the head-quarters of the confederates, was making a discovery that surprised him just as much.

In pursuance of his schemes he had judged it expedient to have an interview with his prisoner, and had made his way to the prison room, accompanied by the servant, who was really engaged to act as guard upon the prisoner.

"The young rascal is keeping very quiet," he said. "I fancied he would get in a rage, and toss the furniture."

"Why he has taken it very calmly," answered the guard. "I have not heard a movement or a sound since he went in there. He must have been stunned with the discovery that he was a prisoner."

"It looks like it," answered Smithers, shortly. "Open the door."

The servant did so. And then the two men started back in as great a surprise as had their confederates in Judy Mulligan's house.

The room was empty.

After a moment Smithers sprang forward with a cry of rage.

He rushed from side to side of the room, examining the bed and the closet, with an idea that the prisoner must be in hiding.

But no trace of him could be found.

There was but one window. Below that was a sheer descent of thirty feet of wall. Back of it was a wide yard, and an open country. Aid

could not have been got from without by calling.

Yet there was no rope, no ladder, no means of escape from within.

Nothing about the room was disturbed. Everything remained precisely as it had been at the boy's entrance.

Smithers stopped his investigation and turned his eyes suspiciously on the guard.

"You let him out, you rascal!"

"As I am a living man, I did not."

"Then you never locked him in. The young villain has never been in that room."

"As I am a living man, I left him there and turned the key on him."

"Then blame me for a blind beggar if the thing isn't too much for me. I swear I can't see through it."

We must leave them to get at the bottom of the mystery in the best way they can, and return to the cunning lad who had so neatly got the best of his roguish enemies.

Mysterious as his escape seemed to the latter there was really no mystery about it, but the whole thing was as simple as possible.

Smithers had made a shrewder guess than he fancied.

The boy had never been in the room.

More from chance than good luck he had discounted his enemies' game, and had not been for a moment a prisoner.

Billy's refusal to enter the room had saved his liberty.

No sooner had the servant disappeared than the restless lad began to look about him.

He was curious to see what kind of a house it was, though he had not a suspicion of anything being wrong.

"Shouldn't call that there room much of an office," he remarked. "Looks like a bed-room 'cept that little desk 'ginst the wall. You bet when I start an office it'll be more tony nor that."

He stepped out into the narrow entry. There was a closed door at his right, leading into a side room.

Curiosity led him to open this door, and take a peep into the room.

"Nother bed-room," he muttered. "Tonier than t'other one. And yonder's a mighty nice pictur' over the mantle. Reckon I'll take a closer squint."

He entered the room and walked toward the picture which had attracted his attention. The door swung quietly to behind him, until it stood but slightly ajar.

He was still admiring the painting when the servant passed along the hall with his cat-like tread. This saved the imperiled boy. Had he heard a footstep he would have left the room.

He had not a remote suspicion of fraud.

The first thing that attracted his attention was the quick slam of a door, and the squeal of a rusty lock, as its key was quickly turned.

Billy started in surprise.

He moved hastily across the room to the door.

Just as he reached it he heard a satirical laugh in the entry, and the voice of the servant saying:

"Just wait there, my sharp lad, till Mr. Smithers comes. He won't be long, maybe."

The boy stopped short, his hand on the door.

His eyes had been suddenly and decidedly opened.

He had not only smelt a rat, but he had seen every inch of the queer little animal, from his nose to his tail.

He was on the point of giving a long whistle—but checked himself and concluded he wouldn't.

"Oh my! Hoopee! Ha! ha! hoopee!" he broke out in suppressed tones. "Dunder and blitzen but things is gay! Oh, lawsee! it's wuth a wagon load o' sourcroust, and a little dog 'tween the hind wheels! Kinder lost my brains, gentlemen o' the jury, but I've sorter found 'em ag'in. Talk 'bout mince-pie and pound-cake bein' rich! Why, they can't hold a penny dip 'long side o' this. Soho! I've jist got out o' chancery by the skin o' my teeth. I bet you a saucer full o' pickled ingyins I don't git in ag'in. It's my innin's now, and jist see if I don't handle the fat a trifle slicker than these coons. Guess I'll kinder slide out o' this, and guv 'em a call."

He left the room, with a merry snicker, which he quickly suppressed.

These were dangerous quarters. He must mind his eye.

He made his way down-stairs with great caution, wide awake to every sound that came to his sharp ears.

An hour passed, and Billy Brick was still in that building. He had found good openings to get out, but he did not want to go just yet. He

wanted to get an idea of the make-up of that mansion. Some day a knowledge of the ins and outs of that house might stand him in good stead.

Several times in his stealthy roaming he had come near discovery by some of the inmates. But a hasty slip into an adjoining room, or a handy closet, had saved him.

A half-hour of his time, indeed, he had spent in the kitchen cupboard, where he had been coaxed by a fat cook.

On her departure to the rear yard the concealed boy slipped hastily out, and shot forward into the dining-room, and from there to the front region of the house.

He had about enough of it now, and had slipped into a side room, with the intention of making his exit by a window, when the sound of voices met his ears.

He stopped and listened. The voices came from an adjoining room, through a communicating door.

Curious to hear what it was all about, in a moment Billy had his ear at the key-hole of this door, intently listening.

What he heard sent him into a cold shiver, as if a bucket of icy water had been flung over him.

It was the conclusion of that conversation between the two conspirators which we have already given, in which they had debated in cold blood the murder of their youthful prisoner.

Something else stuck to the listener's ears. The conspirators spoke of the "Sterling Estate" as the object of their schemes. The Sterling Estate? There was something familiar in the sound. He had certainly heard it before. He grew curious on the spot to know something more about this estate.

While this was running through his head the conference of the conspirators ended. One of them left the room, bent on some project which the wide-awake boy fancied related to himself. Was this chap after the treasure-box that he had hidden in his room?

Billy felt that there was no time to lose. After all his efforts he might lose the valuable object left in his charge unless he made haste. And he felt that there was more than life depended upon it. He was sure that his own future fortune was locked up in that casket.

He ran to the window, with intent to leap out. To his dismay there was the tricky servant, tying up some flower bushes outside.

He hurried to the door, but stopped as hastily when he heard a footstep in the hall.

Smithers had left the room, and was walking up and down the hall, as if for exercise.

The impatient boy was nailed on both sides. He crouched in a corner of the room, biting his lips in spite.

For more than half an hour he remained there, curled up in a heap, and growling like a trapped wild-cat.

Still that steady step went up and down the hall. Still the gardener kept at his work beneath the window. The precious minutes were slipping by.

"By Jiminy, I won't stand it any longer!" declared the impatient lad. "Mought as well lose my head here as lose my fortune there. Bet I kin outrun that galoot, anyhow. Here goes fur a dive."

He glided to the window. A glance out brought a spasm of delight to his heart. The gardener was gathering up his clippings. He was about to depart.

The uneasy boy waited with the utmost impatience. He could hardly stand the fellow's slow movements. Yet he managed to restrain himself for five minutes more, when the man walked deliberately away with his load.

Hardly had he turned the corner ere the boy was out of the window, and had shot around the opposite corner of the house.

The front gate was before him, and no one in the way. A minute took him into the open street.

He was free at last from a frightful peril, and he flung his hat triumphantly into the air, as he hurried along the thinly-built street.

A half hour afterward found him in the street of his own residence, the noisy avenue graced by Judy Mulligan's habitation.

The boy entered the house and made his way back to the kitchen without coming in sight of the stairs, where the guard was then on duty.

Judy was there. On seeing her tenant she held up her hand in quick warning.

"Don't spake, avick!" she cried, in low, excited tones. "There's one o' thim yander. It's a thafe they say ye are."

"They're bloody liars!" exclaimed the lad, in surprise and indignation. "I knowed they'd

be up to some trick. They ain't been in my room, Judy?"

"Smother yer voice, will ye? Kape still, an' I'll tell ye it all."

Billy obeyed, while the excited woman rapidly ran over the story of the late events.

"And it's after a s'arch-warrant he is now, and it's minute by minute I'm expectin' the impudent loon back."

"To search my room?"

"An' have ye anything there, thin?"

"Nothin' but what's got a right there. But there's somethin' these fellers 'd give a gold-mine fur. I must get it out."

"Faix, an' ye'll have throuble to git past that bull-dog on the stairs."

"Him!" exclaimed Billy, in contempt. "You 'll see me discount him. There's more ways nor one in gittin' to my room. Do you know how I do when I'm out late o' nights, and you lock the door on me?"

"Slape out, I suppose."

"Not much!" laughed Billy. "Come out yere an' I'll show you."

He led the way into the yard, followed by the curious woman.

A rough shed stood here, which served as a summer kitchen.

With the agility of a fox Billy mounted to the roof of this by the aid of a short plank.

It brought him to the level of the second floor. The window of his room was some ten feet above him.

Taking a long pole that lay on the shed, he leaned it against the building, fixing the lower end securely in a crevice of the roof.

Like a cat he climbed its slippery length, heedless of the fact that it bent beneath his weight. A minute brought his hands within reach of the window.

He grasped the sill with both hands. As he did so the pole slipped and fell, leaving him dangling against the side of the house.

But he was too active to mind that. He lifted himself by his arms, released one hand to throw up the sash, and in a minute more he had swung his lithe form into the window, and was looking down on Mrs. Mulligan with a roguish laugh.

"The devil's in the boy," muttered that good lady, as she re-entered the kitchen. "Faix, an' it's lucky I've nothin' to timpt burglars, if me house can be entered so 'asy as that."

Her return to the kitchen was hastened by a knock on the front door.

"Hist, lad," she cried to Billy. "Be spry. It's back they are ag'in."

She made her way slowly to the door, to give the boy time to act.

Yet it took him some time to regain the box, which he had hidden with great care.

He had just reached the window with it, when he heard steps and voices at the door.

The pole was gone. It was too late to escape. Yet one thing could be done.

He held the box out of the window and let it fall. It dropped down by the side of the shed, and fell into a clump of long grass that grew there. The grass blades gave way, and then curved over it, hiding it completely.

When the door opened the tenant of the room was seated in a very easy attitude, and with a very saucy face, as we have described at the end of the last chapter.

CHAPTER VIII.

BILLY BRICK RECEIVES VISITORS.

WE need not repeat what we have already said, that the rascally house-agent, Jesse Johnson, was utterly overwhelmed by surprise, on seeing the boy, whom he had supposed locked up in a distant dungeon, seated in his room, with a saucy grin on his self-confident face.

"This is incredible!" with white face and trembling hands. "How did you get here?"

"Traveled yere on shank's mare, I reckon," answered the boy, coolly. "Come up in Mrs. Mulligan's elevator."

"But you should be—you were somewhere else," stammered the astounded agent.

"Fore I come here, you mean? Reckon as how I was. Be'n in two or three somewhere elses."

"Hang it!" cried Jesse, losing his temper and prudence at the boy's saucy manner. "You were under lock and key. You were locked up in tight quarters. How did you get out?"

"Dunno what ye're hintin' at," answered the unmoved boy. "Ain't been nowhere 'cept here."

"You lie, you young rascal!" cried the furious agent.

"That mought be," rejoined Billy. "Tain't

the fu'st time as some darned fool has told me that. Reckon maybe as how I don't alius toe the line straight up to the truth."

"Blast your impudent eyes! I'll stake you into ribbons if you don't hold your saucy tongue!"

"Wish you would," replied Billy, without changing a muscle in his face. "Like ter have my dinner settled. Ain't no time ter take my usual horseback ride in the Park."

The furious agent advanced upon him, enraged beyond control by the saucy coolness of his opponent.

But he was stopped by the voice of his rough-faced companion.

"Oh, let the boy alone!" he remarked. "Don't you see he's only chaffing you? You ought to have wit enough to know that you can't stop that chap's tongue from wagging unless you cut it out. We didn't come here for street slack."

Jesse stopped short at this reproof.

"You are right. I was playing the fool," he acknowledged. "We must search the room at once."

Billy looked at them.

"Is that all fair and square?" he asked.

"They've got a s'arch-warrant," said Judy, with a knowing look at her tenant. "They sarved it on me."

"Didn't serve it on me," rejoined Billy.

"Reckon as how I'm the proprietor o' this here room. Got to serve it on me 'fore I'll let any on 'em touch a stick o' my furnitoor. S'pose I know smethin' 'bout ther law."

At this demand, the constable produced his warrant and read it to the imperturbable boy, who listened with great composure, insisting upon every word being read, and the hard legal terms translated.

"Signed 'Alderman Jenkins.' Let me see that signatoor. Can't play no counterfeit on this chicken."

The constable showed it to him.

"Reckon that's the alderman's ink-splash. Seen it afore. Go 'head, hosses. Billy Brick ain't fool 'nough ter git in ther way o' the law. Sooner try ter butt a locomotor off the track."

Thus given permission, the officers began their search. But the house-agent, who yet seemed in a flurry from his surprise, came up to the boy and asked in a low tone:

"You may as well tell the truth. How did you get into the room? The door was locked and the key down-stairs."

"Tumbled inter it, down the chimbley," answered Billy.

Jesse clinched his hand, as a flash of anger shot across his face. But he restrained himself, and asked:

"How did you get out of that other room, when the door was locked, and the key gone?"

"Tumbled outer it, up the chimbley," answered the boy, with the same easy coolness.

"You impudent liar and reprobate!" cried Jesse, bursting into a sudden fury, and clutching for the boy, with intent to give him the shaking he had promised.

But he only clutched the chair, out of which Billy had slipped like a weasel. He was now seated on the window-sill, with a broad grin on his saucy face.

"Want any more information, mister?" he asked. "Got any houses ter rent where ther chimbleys don't work that way?"

"Houses to rent?"

"Reckon you s'pose I don't know yer. I never furgit a pretty phiz like yours."

Mrs. Mulligan stood in the doorway, with her hands on her hips, laughing loudly at the ready wit of her young tenant, and winking to Billy to keep it up.

But the house-agent apparently had enough of it. He turned suddenly away, biting his lips in spleen, and joined the others in their search.

They meanwhile had been turning over the boy's scanty furniture, examining the bedding, the slender closet with its slim stock of clothing, and a box in which Billy kept some of his movables.

Nothing was found, however.

"It is here, somewhere," declared the leader of the party. "I know he has it. Sound the walls and the floor."

They did so. The walls were everywhere whole. But the uncarpeted floor was not very solid. Several of the boards gave. One of them was so loose that they sought to wrench it from its place.

There was no difficulty. The nails easily gave way. The short piece of floor board came up, revealing a cavity beneath, between it and the ceiling of the room below.

But the cavity was empty. They probed it

until they reached the joist on either side. Nothing was there.

Judy Mulligan still stood in the doorway, curious to see what would come of it all. Her tenant's expression told her that he had made all safe.

Jesse Johnson turned suddenly to him, with an angry face.

"You sly young villain, you have got it hidden here somewhere!" he cried. "Where is that box? What have you done with it?"

"That what?" asked Billy, with affected surprise.

"That box? Are you hard of hearing?"

"A little. This right ear o' mine don't allers come up to the scratch. Maybe if you'd spell it I could take it in better. Is it b-o-c-k-s, or b-w-x-x-p-s? Which on them two, mister?"

Jesse glared at him, too angry to answer.

"It is neither," retorted his rough companion. "It is b-o-x. And we'd like to know what you've done with it, quick as lightning. Mind your eye now, and don't try any of your smartness on me, if you don't want a box that will settle your hash."

"Who's you, hossfly? Ain't Imperor o' Russia, be you?"

"I'll show you who I am, in short meter, if you don't cut short your slack."

"Oh, I know you now. Ye're the jolly crackman o' the Fourth Ward. Got a state-room down at Moyamensing, and a private box up at Cherry Hill. Queer I didn't twig you sooner."

The fellow turned away in some confusion. Billy's random shot had hit home. A new look came on the boy's sharp face. He had got his man nailed.

The angry house-agent caught the grinning boy by the shoulder. "Where's that box?" he demanded. "By the Saints, if you don't tell me I'll fling you out of the window!"

"B-o-x, this time? Solid?"

"Yes."

"Then I dunno. Dunno nothin' 'bout a box."

"You lie, you hound!"

"Then what's the use blatherin'? Ain't 'spectin' ter git the truth outa a liar, be ye? Look old 'nough ter know better."

The furious villain bent the boy back out of the window, as if he intended to carry out his threat.

Judy ran screaming across the room.

"Lave the gosssoon alone!" she yelled. "Af ye be afther doin' him a harm I'll have the rope round your neck for a bloody murderer! An' that's on the word of a Mulligan!"

The villain, who had felt a momentary murderous thought, did not dare to carry it out. He released the boy, who did not look a bit scared, and cried out:

"Search the whole house! It is hidden here somewhere. And look after that boy. He must not escape."

"Needn't bother yer brain-pan 'bout that. Ain't got no biz outside just now."

But despite this assurance the rough fellow kept an eye on the boy, while Jesse and the constable proceeded with the search.

The house was not a very roomy one, nor were hiding-places numerous, and the experienced searchers rapidly examined every room, tossing about the bed, furniture and clothing, in spite of the angry abuse of the landlady.

It was all in vain. They reached the kitchen without discovering a shadow of anything suspicious.

The leader of the party wore a look of deep disappointment. He had been sure of success, and felt himself baffled.

There was an uneasy look on Billy's face as they approached the door leading to the yard. He tried to throw it off, but the cunning house-agent saw it.

"Aha!" he cried. I had almost forgotten. The rascal may have dropped it out of his window into the yard. We must search there."

Billy's lip fell as the party hurried through the kitchen door. He followed them looking so blue that they felt they had him now for sure.

The shrewd agent looked up to the window of the room they had lately left. Then his eyes followed down the line till they stopped at the grassy corner where the box had really fallen.

He turned and looked at Billy, who could not conceal his uneasiness.

"I've got you now, you young rat!" cried Jesse triumphantly. "It is in that bunch of grass, as I'm a living man!"

"Reckon as how I mought as well guv up the ship," acknowledged the boy, disconsolately. "You've euther l me this game, and ther ain't no use squealin'. Go fur it, and be fiddled!"

Jesse needed no orders on that point. He hastened to the suspicious corner and swept aside

the grass, while the constable let fall a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder.

But the agent started back as suddenly as if he had been bitten by a rat and turned with a face full of fury.

"You blamed young hound!" he hissed.

"Well, ain't it there? Why don't you take it, and stop yer blowin'?"

"You dog! You know it is not there!"

With a face full of surprise, hope and doubt, Billy sprung forward to the spot where he had seen the box fall and swept aside the long grass.

To his utter astonishment his eyes met an empty space. The box was gone!

He turned to his captors with a sober look, but with a return of his cunning.

"Dunno as how I said it were there," he remarked. "Never said I had any box. That's all your say-so, and it wasn't perlite for a boy to contradict."

Despite his coolness Billy was much the most surprised of the party. He did not know what to make of this. Judy Mulligan had not been down-stairs since the box was dropped, and nobody else was in the house.

The house-agent looked at him sourly.

"He is a thief anyhow," he declared. "He has hidden his spoils. We will take him."

Billy protested against this, but the constable forced him to go.

The party was stared at, when the boy left the house with his three captors, but none of the rough characters in the street ventured to interfere.

On reaching a more respectable neighborhood the constable left them, leaving his prisoner in charge of the two others, who declared they had a warrant for his arrest from an uptown alderman.

There was an evil look on Jesse Johnson's face, as he fixed his eyes on the captive, who walked along without an effort to escape.

They were now in a thinly settled portion of the city, and soon reached an open lot, which they could save time by crossing.

A muddy and slimy pool of water decorated the middle of the lot.

Beside this was a group of boys, who seemed engaged in some sort of play.

They looked up in surprise on seeing Billy in such company, and left their play to gather round.

The boys were his ordinary scapegrace companions. There were more than a dozen of them, lads from fourteen to eighteen, some as stout as men.

The reason of the prisoner's quiet submission now suddenly appeared.

"Hillo, roosters!" he shouted. "These fellers is goin' ter carry me ter the lock-up. Goin' ter stand that, are ye?"

"No," yelled the boys in chorus.

"Then go fur 'em. Guv 'em a soakin' in the duck-pond. Show 'em that the boys o' Philadelink ain't goin' to be sot on."

These words produced a sudden change in the situation. The group of stout boys at once set on the two men, Billy leading and showing them the example.

With seven or eight boys to each man they were completely overpowered. They shouted lustily for help, but it was too late.

In a minute they had been hustled to the edge of the pond, and tossed into its slimy depths. Some of the boys tumbled in with them, but the little rascals didn't mind that.

Covered with slime and mud, and presenting a woeful picture, the victims struggled to their feet, and ran for life, followed by pelting mud and shouts of laughter from the vagrant throng.

Billy Brick had won the game.

CHAPTER IX.

ON A STILL HUNT.

THREE months have passed since the date of our last chapter. And in all that time Billy Brick has not set eyes on the lost casket.

What has become of it he is at a loss to tell, but that his enemies have not got it he is sure.

But it is necessary to briefly relate the events of these three months, and bring our story up to date.

After the mud bath to which the cunning boy had treated his foes, he returned triumphantly home to tell the story to Judy Mulligan.

We need not say that that good lady enjoyed it quite as much as did her tenant.

"Faix, an' it's a broth of a boy ye are!" she declared. "It did me sowl good to hear ye talkin' to them bloody thaves, an' I'd guv my best fryin'-pan to see them rowlin' in the mud."

"You never see'd sich jolly mud babies as they made," laughed Billy. "Bet they don't come howlin' 'round here soon."

"But what's all this about a box, me lad? An' what's in it, at all?"

"You've got me there, Judy. I know no more what's in it than old Abraham. Daddy Grim guv it to me an' told me to freeze onto it. An' he said as how there 'd be coons arter it."

"Faix, and I'm thinkin' it must be very valuable it is."

"You bet. It's wu'th millions, more or less."

"An' whatever have ye done widd it?"

"That's what gits me. I dropped it cut the winder into that bunch o' grass. An' it guv me the double-j'inted rheumatiz in my big toe when that chap went rakin' there. Duuno what the blazes is come of it."

"That's quare," remarked Judy, as she fell into a fit of deep reflection.

Billy returned to the yard and made another search for the box, thinking it might have slipped into some crevice and so escaped discovery.

But he soon found that he was mistaken. The ground was hard and dry. There was no hiding-place to be found.

Frequent consultations took place during the rest of that day between the lad and his landlady.

They finally came to the conclusion, after debating the question on every side, that there was only one solution of the mystery.

The box had not gone without hands, that was sure. But whose hands?

No vagrant who had entered the house by chance, would have thought of looking in that bunch of grass for a treasure.

And the front door was locked. There was no entrance except over the fence to the rear. But who would think of climbing that fence in search of valuables in Judy Mulligan's back-yard?

"The thaving omadhoun that saw it fall," suggested Judy. "There's slippery folks in the houses ayant."

This was a good idea. In that region houses were crowded close together, and just back of the row that fronted on the street was another row, facing on a court.

The upper windows of these houses overlooked the yards of the more stylish mansions on the street.

Any person sitting at one of these windows might have seen the boy let fall the box, and noted where it fell.

He might also have seen the search going on, and judged that the box was valuable.

That would be enough. It was not likely that any serious question of honesty would stand in the way.

"Ther ain't no two ways 'bout it," declared Billy, positively. "Some funny chap from back there has hopped the fence and jugged my box."

"Lucky he did," suggested Judy, "or it would have fell intill worse hands."

"That's so," rejoined the boy, thoughtfully. "Reckon it's a blessin' in disguise. But I'm goin' to transmogrify myself into a committee of 'vestigation to-morrow, you bet."

It was now far after dark, and too late to do anything that day.

After his night's sleep Billy rose and made his way to the court, on his trip of investigation.

He made his first stop at the house directly back of Mrs. Mulligan's, from whose windows the yard could be best seen.

But the people seemed to be yet in bed. The windows were not open, and his knocks upon the door brought no response.

"I don't think you will fetch any one," said a woman, from across the court.

"They ain't all dead, be they?" queried Billy. "Eight o'clock's time fur all live Christians to be up and round."

"There is nobody there," answered the woman. "The people that lived there moved out at eight o'clock last night."

Billy stared at her. He then put his hands to his sides, and gave a whistle as loud as a tin trumpet. He had been neatly dished.

"That comes o' puttin' off till to-morrow what oughter be did to-day," he declared. "I'm jist the wu'st sold coon in these diggin's."

"What is wrong?" demanded the woman.

"Somethin' stole outer Mrs. Mulligan's yard. And somebody in that house stole it."

"I shouldn't wonder. I wouldn't trust them."

"Who lived there?" queried the boy.

"Only Mike Flanagan and his old woman, and their boy Mickey."

"A big lump of a boy? Reckon I've see'd some sich chap around."

"Yes. Near grown up. What's lost?"

"A bit of a box, that's all. Dunno what's in it. Say, don't you know where they've gone?"

"No. They slipped out very sly. Running away from the rent, I judge."

Billy was discounted. He made diligent inquiry, but no one could tell him where the Flanagan family had gone. Yet he was as sure that the boy, Mickey Flanagan, had stolen his box as that he had not yet eaten his breakfast.

What was to be done? The Flanagans must be found. But that was no easy task. They were not the kind of people whose names get into the Directory.

After a month's busy search the active boy was as much in the dark as ever.

The boy was in trouble. That box he must have, by hook or crook. How was he to face Daddy Grim, and tell him that it had been lost? Yet he was almost at his wits' ends.

There was one solution of the mystery which, of course, had occurred to him.

The thief might be an agent of the villains who were making such a strong effort to rob him of his treasure-casket.

Yet if that were the case, why had he stolen the box when they were searching for it?

Yet he might have seen this search, judged what was its object, and traced the parties for the purpose of selling them the box. And the quick flight of the Flanagan family with the stolen treasure may have been made to gain time for this investigation.

Billy came to the conclusion at last that the thief had discovered the party of conspirators, had sold them the box, and that he was left completely out in the cold.

Yet the despairing boy had no sooner come to this conclusion than something happened that changed his opinion, and set him all at sea again.

Jesse Johnson returned during his absence, and made another search of Mrs. Mulligan's house.

That settled one point—they had not got the casket. The game was still open.

They evidently fancied that by their long silence they would throw the boy off his guard, and get hold of the treasure before he had time to remove it again.

"And I reckon they would if I'd had it," admitted Billy. "That bloody thief's the best friend I've got in the world. I've saved the box by losin' it, which is a mighty queer conundrum. I owe him ten dollars and a good lickin' when I come across him. Guess I'll giv him the last first. If he gits half o' what I owe him he kin wait fur t'other half."

"And what are you goin' to do next?" asked Mrs. Mulligan, with a hearty laugh at Billy's idea of economy.

"Dunno. It's all swimmin' in my brain yit. But I ain't goin' to sit on my thumb an' suck mint-drops. I'm goin' to work like a hoss in a cider-mill."

Just what course to take was not very clear. There was but one thing he could do, and that was to watch his enemies.

There was the house to which he had been decoyed by a false errand. He set himself at guard duty on that. But after a week's diligent watchfulness, he discovered that it was empty.

There was next Jesse Johnson, the house-agent. He knew the locality of this man's office. But on arriving there he found, to his chagrin, that there was a new name on the sign. The rascally agent had flitted.

Thus several weeks passed in a constant succession of disappointments. The boy began to get out of heart.

Yet there was one thing he was sharp enough to notice. He was not the only one on the watch. In fact, he perceived that there were spies on his own track, and that wherever he went certain persons were sure to be on hand.

This, instead of scaring the shrewd boy, gave him encouragement. As for being afraid of them, that did not enter into his thoughts.

One of these seeming spies was an ill-dressed, youthful figure, apparently but little older than himself. He was a rather stupid-looking youth, of an Irish cast of countenance, yet with something very sharp in his eyes.

This fellow, Billy saw everywhere. He was usually lounging about as if he had nothing to do but to kill time, but he was the most persistent of the spies.

At one time Billy made up his mind to whip him. Then he concluded he wouldn't. It might be best to shut his eyes, and not let on that he had discovered anything.

It is often best to know on what side to look for danger.

But if he could not find his foes himself, he might do so through their agent.

He put one of the shrewdest of his boyish comrades on the track of this spy, with instructions

to find out where he belonged and whom he communicated with.

Three months, as we have said, passed in this series of proceedings. And at the end of that period of time success seemed as far off as ever.

There was one thing puzzled him. In all his wanderings about the city, and his business took him everywhere, he failed to set eye on the face of any of the party of his foes.

The pretty face of Miss Polly Severn also was not to be seen. Had she really left the city, as he had been told?

He did not believe it, but how was it that he never came across her?

This question was answered one afternoon at the end of the three months by his suddenly meeting this lady face to face in an up-town street.

There was a double confusion at this unexpected encounter. Billy grew red in the face, and the young lady slightly pale.

But the boy soon recovered his composure. He made an effort at a very polite bow and remarked:

"Glad ter meet you, Miss Severn. Been kinder keepin' a squint round fer ye. Hope ye're joyin' life."

"You impudent street rat!" she angrily replied. "How dare you address me in the street? Take your dirty face away before I call a policeman."

"Don't feel like kissin' me jist now, I s'pose? Ain't wantin' no more boxes, be ye?"

"Do you hear me, you little villain? I'll slap your mouth if you give me any more impertinence!"

"Guess then I'd best git. Didn't know you had sich a temper. Wonder if Mr. Bill Smithers has found it out. Say, Miss Polly, how did you like the drawin' I put in that box? The little dorg had the best of the row 'cordin' to my notion."

The irate woman was about to make some spiteful answer. But she seemed to think better of it. It was hardly the thing to be measuring street slack with a ragged and impudent varlet like Billy. She turned short and left the spot.

Billy stuck his tongue in his cheek as he followed her with his eyes.

"Lawsee, don't she sail plum? And to think how sweet she was on me onc't! Kinder in love with her, and can't consent to lose sight o' her pretty figure jist yet. No sree! Couldn't think of sich imperliteness."

He put himself on her track at a fair distance in the rear.

Twenty minutes afterward Miss Polly Severn entered a house in one of the up-town streets without a suspicion that she had been followed.

That was not the case with Billy Brick. He knew well that he had been followed. The youthful spy was now leaning on a fire plug not far down the street, with one eye on Billy, and the other on Miss Severn's residence.

CHAPTER X.

HOW TOBY EARNED HIS DINNER.

IT was a morning several days after the date of our last chapter. Through a street in the upper region of the city went the Irish lad whom Billy had discovered acting as spy upon him.

He now evidently had other business on hand, for he walked straight onward, like a person who sees his way clear before him.

He was too direct and decided, in fact. If he had been less so, and practiced his usual sharpness, he might have seen that he was followed.

There was a spy on the track of the spy. The young vagabond whom Billy had chosen for this work was doing his duty nobly.

Blind to the fact that he was followed the Irish lad entered the street to which Miss Polly Severn had been tracked a few days before. He approached the house which this young lady had entered, and rung the bell loudly.

After a few minutes he was admitted.

All this the young scout observed, and stood scratching his head in doubt.

"Dunno what he wants in there," he said.

"Tain't the sort o' place fur a daisy like him."

He seated himself on a convenient door-step, scratched his head more diligently than ever, and went into a deep study of the situation.

After five minutes thus engaged he gave it up for a bad job.

"Don't see through it," he admitted. "Got a notion thar's some gum game afloat. A 'spectable house like that ain't the place fur a gutter-hike like him."

"What's all that 'bout, Toby?" queried a voice at his side. "Breakers ahead, is there?"

Toby looked quickly around, to discover his employer, Billy Brick, who had come up unobserved.

"What's in the wind?" asked the latter.

"Nothin'. 'Cept you owe me a quarter."

"Guess I'm rich 'nough ter pay you. What you squattin' yere for?"

"What's you arter yerself?"

"Jist stepped round ter see a 'quaintance as lives in that house yander."

"That 'un? The one with the green shettters?"

"That's it. Know anything 'bout it?"

"He's there," said Toby, mysteriously.

"Who's there? Not that hikin' slouch?"

"Reckon so. Went in there ten minutes ago. B'en tryin' to scratch out what he's arter."

Billy looked meaningly at the house. Evidently there was something at work. What was it? Was there any way to find out? He stood for several minutes without speaking, his eyes fixed heedfully on the house.

"Come this way, Toby," he said at length, with quick resolution.

The boy followed without a word. He knew that Billy meant work.

A few minutes brought them to a narrow alley that ran in the rear of the row of houses. Up this they went till they reached the fence back of Miss Severn's house.

The fence was eight feet high, with a gate that fortunately was not fastened.

The boys entered without hesitation.

Nobody was visible in the yard. The kitchen door was shut. A range of windows ran along the side of the house, lighting the kitchen and dining-room.

Signing to Toby to keep back, Billy made his way along the range of these, stooping down and slyly peeping in. One of the windows of the dining-room was raised, and through this he observed the kitchen girl, engaged in dusting the room.

Her face was turned half toward him, and he had a good view of her features.

She was plainly an Irishwoman, with a good-humored face, a motherly and benevolent middle-aged person.

The boy stooped down again to think over ways and means. It did not take him long to make up his mind. He slipped back to Toby.

"Ever beg vittals at back doors, Toby?" he asked.

"Guess I did."

"Good! Then I want you to try it on here."

"But I ain't hungry."

"Reckon you kin eat if you ain't hungry. Never see'd the time a chap like you couldn't eat. Ye're pretty near all bread basket. Ther's a good-hearted woman in there, and if you only whine like a stuck pig she'll giv you 'nough ter last a week."

"But what's it all for?"

"Jist ter git her out the way. You keep her gabbing while I go through the house. Got that in?"

"Guess so."

"Go to work, then."

Toby, who knew the business thoroughly, at once obeyed.

He knocked on the kitchen door, with a feeble and despairing knock.

He had to repeat it several times before the woman answered.

When at length she opened the door she saw there a crouching bundle of rags, with a pinched-up and woe-begone face, and a look of semi-starvation.

"Please, ma'am," whined the boy. "I'm 'most a'starvin'. I ain't eat nothin' fur three days."

"Why don't you go home for food? What sort of a father and mother have you?"

Here was an opening for Toby which he did not fail to improve. He whined out a story of five minutes in length about the misfortunes of his parents, and how they had died and left him an orphan, and how he had been for years in a state of freezing and starvation. The young rascal had lies enough at his tongue's end to make a book.

The woman, though she did not half believe him, was tender hearted. He looked to be such a poor shivering waif that she brought him in, seated him in front of the kitchen range, and laid him out a fair meal of cold victuals.

While Toby was eating as ravenously as if he were really in the last stages, she seated herself in a chair before him and kept plying him with questions.

But the boy was not to be confused. He had a ready imagination, and told such a long and moving tale that the minutes slipped by unheeded.

Twenty minutes had passed when she at length rose.

"Well, you'd talk all day if I'd talk to you. Got enough?"

"Yes, thank you, kindly, ma'am."

"Poor little toad! Come here again if you get very hungry. You must go now. I am wasting time from my work."

"I won't never furgit yer kindness, ma'am. Ye've jist 'bout half saved my life."

The rogue had nearly choked himself swallowing the food.

"I 'spect to git work next week, and then I'll be all hokey."

With endless blessings on the good and charitable woman he limped out of the yard.

She shut the kitchen door and returned into the house.

Hardly had she done so before Billy's lithe form shot back, stooping under the level of the window.

In a moment he had rejoined Toby in the alley. His face was full of business and blazing with triumph.

"Jolly fur you, Toby!" he cried. "You're a boss from the word go. Been a-listenin' to you saltin' down that old woman. And you bet I ain't no lame mule."

"Most choked," admitted Toby. "She made me swaller so much. Guess I made her swaller a good deal, too. Hilt any snacks, Billy?"

"Well, I should smile! Owe you a half, Toby. Let's git outer this, an' I'll tell you all 'bout it."

A half-hour afterward found them in a place where they could talk without interruption. Billy looked his comrade meaningly in the face.

"You ain't no gab-tub, Toby? Reckon I kin giv you some secrets 'bout you're leakin'?"

"If I let out a word you kin choke me with a watermelon," answered Toby, who was eager to learn what was afoot.

"I may need your help."

"Guess I won't go back on that."

Billy moved into a more comfortable position and began.

"Well, then, I went through that there house. While you was freezin' on to cold vittals and gabbing like a duck in a frog-pond, I clumb into the winder and sneaked into the house as sly as a weasel."

"I knowed there was a talk goin' on somewhere, and that was what I was arter. I cotech-ed it arter awhile. It was comin' outer a room on the second story."

"One o' the voices I knowed. It was Miss Severn, as lives there and as I know like a breeze. Tother was that jolly lark as you've been arter."

"Find out who he is?" asked Toby.

"Well, I rayther consider! And what he was arter, too. They was through ther perliminaries afore I got there, but I picked up the pith o' the whole bizness. L'arnt more 'bout that coon in five minutes than you've l'arnt in five weeks."

"You don't say so? Who was he?"

"If he ain't that thief of a Mickey Flanagan, I'll be shot!"

"Mickey Flanagan? Dunno who he is."

"S'pose not. Got ter tell you all 'bout it."

Billy proceeded to give his associate some idea of the events which had preceded, and of the object he had in view.

"I thought that chap was a spy put on me," he continued. "I soon found out better. He was spyin' on his own hook."

"When I dropped the box outer the winder he saw it and went for it. 'Twasn't for that they moved away that night. His daddy was runnin' away from the rent. But that worked in for Mickey's game."

"He judged from what he see'd that ther' was money to be got for the box, but he didn't know where to strike it. So he sot to spyin' on me, 'cause he calkerlated I'd be spyin' on tother folks."

"He see'd me talkin' to Miss Severn tother day, and see'd her go inter that house. That giv him an idee as she was one o' them. So he called on her to-day, and found as she was."

"You heered all that?" demanded Toby.

"And a good deal more. Ther's a reg'lar bargain. She's to giv him a hundred dollars for the box. He's to bring it at ten o'clock Friday night, to a place called Sterling Mansion, somewhere 'bove the city."

"Didn't catch where it were, for they kinder got talkin' low 'bout that time. But they've got the whole thing laid out prime. And you bet I've got it down fine. Got ter find out fust where Sterling Mansion is. Heerd 'bout ther Sterling Estate afore."

"What'll you giv to know?"

"I'll make that half a whole dollar."

"Then I'm jist the coon as kin tell yer, kaze I've been there. It's one o' them royal old places 'bout two miles 'bove the city. Hunted chestnuts out there onc't, and got druv off by a dog."

"Jolly for you!" cried Billy in delight. "That's gay as fried oysters. I'm a-goin' for that there coon, Mickey Flanagan. An' I want you an' the boys to help."

"If there's a lark in the wind, you bet we won't go back on it."

"It mought be wuss nur a lark. Jist let's consultate a bit. Got to lay this thing out fine. Ain't goin' to let no iricassed thief like Mickey Flanagan beat me, not if I knows myself."

A long conversation ensued between the brace of young comrades, at the end of which a complete plan was laid.

"We'll be out there early to-morrow mornin'," declared Billy in conclusion. "Got to spy out the ground 'fore we kin lay our ambush."

CHAPTER XI.

MICKEY FLANAGAN IN HOT WATER.

TEN o'clock Friday night was near at hand. It was a dark night, that threatened rain, though none had yet fallen.

The scene to which we must betake ourselves was on one of those beautiful rural streets or lanes above the city, which are lined on both sides by country seats, most of them large and elegant.

Sterling Mansion was an imposing brown-stone mansion, with a broad, stately front, and large wings. Looked at in the gloom of night it presented a striking aspect.

It was surrounded by an extensive spread of rolling ground, highly cultivated and very charming by day, though its beauty was lost in the gloom of night.

Many noble trees, and thick clumps of shrubbery, adorned the grounds. The carriage-drive and the footpaths leading from the street to the house were bordered with flower-bushes.

At near ten o'clock, on the night in question, a boyish form might have been seen, making his way along the street, and gazing eagerly through the gloom for the mansion.

He wore a long-tailed coat, beneath which something was concealed.

A look of satisfaction came into his face as his eyes fell on the noble proportions of the building, standing on a knoll of land some distance back.

Without hesitation he opened the gate and entered. He followed the footwalk until he came near the house.

Then he paused, near one of the thickest clumps of bushes, and looked sharply around him.

"If they take Mickey Flanagan for a fool, they're barking up the wrong tree," he said to himself. "I'm going to see if they mean honesty, or if they mean roguery before I hand over that box. I'll hide it somewhere here. If all's square I can come back and get it."

He studied the bushes before him in search of a good hiding-place. The leaves stirred as if moved by the wind, though there did not seem a breath of air stirring.

But not heeding this Mickey stopped, took the object from under his coat, and thrust his left hand into the bushes, feeling for a proper place of concealment.

He suddenly jerked his hand back, as if he had touched a snake, while a cry of surprise came from his lips. His hand had fallen on what seemed cold human flesh.

Mickey stood for a moment with wide-open eyes, as if there was something supernatural, to his fancy, in the situation.

At that moment a cry came from the bushes. "Go fur him, fellers!"

In an instant a half dozen forms rose as if by magic, and ere Mickey fairly knew what had happened they had surrounded and seized him.

One of them grasped the box, to which he clung with all his strength, while he yelled lustily for aid.

A sharp tussle succeeded, part of the boys hampering his arms and legs, while the one who had seized the box tried to tear it from his hands.

Mickey held on desperately, and continued to yell for help.

His cries were heard. The front door of the mansion was thrown open. The rays of a bright light shot out across the lawn. The forms of several men were seen, running hastily out.

The lamplight clearly showed the struggle that was taking place. Hope sprung into Mickey's heart as he saw a party coming to the rescue.

"Help!" he cried. "I've got it here! They'll have it if you ain't quick!"

The men dashed across the porch and out over the lawn.

At that moment the boy who was struggling

for the box tore it from the grasp of the holder. The other boys bore him backward, and flung him prostrate to the ground.

"I've got it!" came in the voice of Billy Brick. "Hike, fellers! Git like weasels! They're arter us sharp!"

He gave the example by dashing down the path.

The pursuing men were not twelve feet distant, yelling for the boys to stop.

At that critical instant Billy's foot struck the handle of a rake that lay across the path, and down he went sprawling.

The box flew from his hands and shot ten feet forward into the darkness.

He hastened to rise, but ere he could scramble to his feet a strong hand had him firmly by the collar.

"Snatch it, Toby!" he yelled. "There it goes! Never mind me! Snatch it, and hike away lively!"

One of the boys in advance was seen to stoop and pick up something from the path.

Then he shot forward, pursued by two of the men. The next instant he jumped into the bushes and disappeared from sight in the darkness.

Although Billy Brick was a fast prisoner, held so tightly that he found it impossible to escape, his tongue was at liberty, and he did not hesitate to use it.

"Go it, Toby!" he shouted. "Rattle away lively! Never mind me! If I don't come back you sing the news to the cops!"

"Hold your jaw, you young villain!" cried the captor, giving the noisy boy a rough stroke across the mouth. "I'll break your jaw-bone if you don't shut up!"

"Let me at him!" exclaimed Mickey, who had scrambled to his feet. "It was him stole it from me! Let me at him!"

"You! You thunderin' idiot!" roared the man. "You want a sound kickin' yourself. You've let the cat out of the bag, and they've laid an ambush for you!"

"Let him at me, if he wants to," suggested Billy. "Jist giv him a chance to lick me. It's a shame to hinder a good-looking fellow like Mickey when he wants some fun."

"Hold your tongue, you scoundrell or I'll give you the lickin' you're after. By Jove! if that boy gets away, I'll kick you into the middle of next week!"

"That's a lie!" answered the irrepressible boy. "The thing can't be did. I bet you a pig to a 'tater-parin' you can't kick me inter the middle o' next Sunday, and that ain't two days off."

"Shut up, I tell you! Come here!"

He dragged his prisoner back to the house, followed by Mickey, who looked sadly out of sorts.

Meanwhile the chase continued. There was rending of luses, as pursuers and pursued dashed through them. Angry cries broke upon the night air. The sounds spread further and further from the house.

But the darkness of the night and the lushy character of the ground favored the boys, who could dash like weasels through cavities too small for their pursuers.

Only one of them was caught, and he was not the one with the box.

And even this prisoner escaped, by suddenly slipping out of his ragged coat and leaving it in the hands of his incautious captor.

They returned empty-handed.

One prisoner remained in their hands, and he the most important of the party. But the box, the main object of their enterprise, was gone, and success seemed as far off as ever.

All they knew was that it was in the hands of a boy called Toby. So much Billy had carelessly let out. But that was not much satisfaction to the cheated conspirators.

Fifteen minutes afterward found a strange party in the brilliantly-lighted room of that stately mansion.

The three conspirators were present, and with them their lady associate, Polly Severn, by whom this enterprise had been planned.

In their midst sat the two boys, Mickey Flanagan, looking dreadfully downcast and melancholy, and Billy Brick, who was as spruce as a lark, and really seemed as if he enjoyed the situation.

Any one would have said from their looks that Mickey was the prisoner, and Billy the friend of the conspirators.

As for them their faces were full of lowering anger. Miss Severn was furious. But luckily for Billy her anger was directed against the other boy.

"The confounded ninny!" she exclaimed, spite-

fully. "He looks old enough to hold his tongue, yet he must go and blather out the whole business, and sell the game to these rascally boys."

"I didn't do anything of the sort," exclaimed Mickey. "I never opened my jaws. If anybody told it must have been you."

"I tell! I will scratch your eyes out if you say that again!" cried the woman, in a fury of rage.

It was evident that Polly Severn had a lively temper of her own when she got wakened up.

"Who was it told you?" demanded Smithers, turning to the prisoner, who was having a quiet laugh to himself over the fight.

"Both on 'em, I reckon," he quietly replied. "You lie!" declared Mickey, hotly. "You lie if you say I told you."

"And you double the lie if you say it was me," cried the angry woman.

"That makes it a double-barreled lie," rejoined the unabashed boy. "Reckon I must ha' dreamt it, then, if nobody told me. That's it, I s'pose. I dreamt that sly coon was goin' to be here to-night at ten o'clock, with the box that he stole from me, blast his ugly figurehead."

"You lie!" declared Smithers. "You didn't dream anything of the sort."

"Got to be a three-barreled lie now," remarked Billy, in his most provoking tone. "Keep it up, and we'll have a reg'lar six barrel revolver of a lie 'fore long. Then if it goes off somebody'll git hurt."

"This is all arrant nonsense," exclaimed Tompkins, looking up angrily. "You don't expect to get anything but gas and impudence out of that boy, do you? Lock up the young villain, and we'll decide what to do with him. I bet we'll make him laugh on the other side of the month before we're through."

"Don't b'lieve I kin do it, mister," rejoined Billy. "I'll try it, if it'll blige you. But every time I try to laugh it jist spreads all over my face."

Ere he could say anything more he was dragged from the room, two of the men jerking him angrily away.

"As for you," said Smithers, addressing Mickey, who remained, "you've let the cat out of the bag somehow, I know that. You've got to redeem yourself by getting that box back. The boy named Toby has it."

"And I've got a notion I know who he is," replied Mickey. "I'll go for him."

Five minutes afterward the two men returned alone. They had left their prisoner somewhere under lock and key.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERIES OF AN OLD MANSION.

A WEEK after the date of the adventure just recorded, a party of police in citizen's dress visited Sterling Mansion.

They were met at the door by a servant, who escorted them to the parlor, and went to call the lady of the house.

In a few minutes afterward she entered. It was a young, pretty-faced, handsomely-dressed woman that made her appearance, no less a person in fact than Miss Polly Severn.

It was with some slight show of embarrassment that the leader of the party told their errand. Everything here seemed so quiet and homelike that he began to think that he had been made a fool of.

His story was to the effect that there was a boy missing who had been last seen in that mansion. His comrades had notified the police that he had been dragged in there as a prisoner, and that a week had passed since without his return.

Miss Severn listened with a faint smile on her pretty face. Here and there in the story she gave a slight laugh, as if the thing were utterly ridiculous.

"You are quite welcome to your boy, if you can find him," she said, merrily, after the story had ended.

"You deny that there is any such person here, then?"

"Why, you are at liberty to search. I shall certainly be surprised if you find anybody."

"But the boy is undoubtedly missing. We did not come here without being sure of that."

"He has stolen something, I suppose, and run away. So this is the revenge the young rascals threatened?"

"Threatened? Then you know something bearing upon this?"

"Why, all I know is that there was a party of ragamuffins here last week stealing chestnuts. They fancied they owned the estate, and when they were driven off they threatened to get even. I imagine that this is their idea of getting even."

"If they have sent us here on a fool's errand I

will make some of them howl," rejoined the officer.

"As I said, you are at liberty to search the house," she replied. "In fact, I shall insist on your doing so. I presume you know, gentlemen, that this estate is in the hands of guardians appointed by will, and that I am only housekeeper here."

"We had heard something of the kind."

"That being the case I cannot rest under any suspicion of this kind. I demand that you shall set it at rest by a thorough search."

Her voice was now earnest and decided. She looked very resolute.

"That is our purpose," answered the officer. "I am glad you perceive the necessity of it. I do not expect to find anything, but we must do our duty."

"Proceed, gentlemen. The house is at your disposal."

They went to work at once. The party divided into several sections and began a search of the mansion, extending from the cellars to the upper rooms.

The mansion was singular in one respect. There had been an original stone house in that locality since before the Revolution. This had been modernized by taking down its front wall and replacing it in brown stone, while building new additions as wings to the old house.

Thus the central part of the mansion was old-fashioned, with oak wainscoting, deep fireplaces and antique furniture.

The wings were entirely modern. And by the aid of curtains and drapery and bits of modern furnishing much of the old look had been taken from the ancient apartments.

The house was elegantly adorned, and the police were much impressed with its magnificence as they proceeded with their task.

In fact, their search was not a very thorough one. They were satisfied that they had been made fools of, and they went through the building very hastily.

Yet no secret hiding-places appeared. It looked as if a fly could not be concealed.

Miss Severn attended the leader of the party, expressing herself as curious to learn the result of their enterprise.

When they reached the dining-room, with its oak paneling, and its great fire-place, up which in past times had gone a roaring fire of logs, but which was now closed in by a shining brass fender, she seated herself in an arm-chair in the chimney corner, with a smile of amusement on her face.

"I hope you will take your boy away with you when you find him," she said. "I would not like any such strays as that left about the place."

"We will," answered the officer briefly. "When we find him."

He seated himself and entered into a conversation with Miss Severn, leaving his companions to complete the search.

The subject of their conversation was the peculiar terms on which the Sterling estate had been left. This information Miss Severn was quite ready to communicate.

It seemed, by her story, that it had belonged some seventeen or eighteen years before, to a Mr. Marcus Sterling, whose wife had died a year previously.

This gentleman had become very much depressed from the loss of his wife. But his grief was tenfold augmented by the loss of his only son, who was stolen from him about this time.

The object of the abduction could not be told. Rewards were offered for the return of the lost child, but they failed to bring him back.

The father had gradually sunk into a settled gloom, and died of melancholy about two years after the loss of his son.

On reading his will it proved that he had left the estate under the guardianship of the Orphan's Court, for the benefit of his heir. Every effort was to be made for the recovery of the stolen child. But if the twenty-first birthday of the boy passed without his being found, then the estate would fall to the nearest relatives of the deceased. But it was to be returned to the son if he should be discovered at any time afterward.

Such was the story as told by Miss Severn. She had been chosen housekeeper by the court, on the death of the old house-keeper, which had happened a month before.

The nearest heir to the estate, in case the son should not be found, was Mr. William Smithers, a first cousin of Mr. Sterling. But two other relatives had recently made their appearance, from California, so that there were now three claimants for the estate.

By the time she had finished this account the officers had completed their search.

"There is nothing to be found," was the report. "It is impossible that any such missing boy can be hidden here."

"Then we must go over the grounds. Is there any other building, Miss Severn?"

"Yes. You will find a tenant-house at the foot of the hill. And a stable attached, with wagon-house and sheds."

"Very well. We must complete our task."

"I hope you will find something," she answered, with a gay smile. "It is a shame to bring you so far for nothing."

"It is something to have made your acquaintance," replied the polite officer.

In a half-hour afterward they had left the place, satisfied that they had been sent on a false errand, but equally satisfied that Sterling Mansion was a palatial residence, and that Miss Severn was a sweet and charming lady.

They had only seen one side of Polly Severn. She had another side which was not quite so sweet.

In fact the officers had not fairly disappeared before her entrancing smile changed to a look of scornful disdain and triumph.

"I fancy I have most decidedly pulled wool over the eyes of those smart gentlemen," she remarked. "We were in danger, there is no doubt of that. But all is now clear before us."

She watched them as they went with military tread down the road toward the station. She waited, in fact, until the sound of a locomotive whistle showed that the train had come and gone.

Then she returned with a serene look to the house.

Reaching it she entered the kitchen, obtained there a platter of food and made her way back to the dining-room.

Here she closed and locked the doors. There were servants in the house. But these spent their nights in the tenant-house, which lay some distance in the rear. They knew nothing of the secrets of the mansion, and it was not intended that they should know.

William Smithers was the only other resident of the house, while the rough fellow who had aided in searching Judy Mulligan's residence acted as gardener and performed other duties.

Miss Severn's movements after locking the doors were curious. She began by removing the tall arm-chair, on which she had been seated while talking with the officer.

It had occupied the recess between the protruding fireplace and the wall.

On removing it there was displayed the oak paneling, which covered the wall to a height of five feet.

Into a crevice of this, on the chimney side, she inserted an instrument.

There came a crackling sound, and a portion of the paneling, of some eight inches square, came loose, and slipped out into her hands.

There was revealed a dark cavity. Instead of the wall showing under the boards, an opening leading into the deep fireplace appeared.

She put her face to the opening.

"How do you feel to-day?" she asked, mockingly.

"Kinder dusty," came back in a voice that seemed to roll from the depths of a cavern.

"Are you ready for your dinner?"

"Reckon as how I mought pick a frog's trotters, or some sich delicate grub."

It was the voice of Billy Brick. His cruel captors had imprisoned him in that extraordinary place, an old fireplace, about six feet square, with no more air and light than might straggle down the chimney-top.

Yet it was evident that his spirits were not broken. He was the same irrepressible Billy Brick as of old.

Without another word the woman passed in the platter of food to the hand and arm that were extended to receive it, and closed the cavity, shutting the prisoner in again to his death solitude.

In this narrow hole the captive had spent a week that seemed a year in length.

As we may well imagine, he had not remained there without efforts to escape. But his prison was a strong one. The bright brass plate that closed the entrance to the old fireplace had a strong brick wall behind it, with which the villains had built in their prisoner.

The only opening to his prison was that which had been fashioned on the side to admit food, and for other purposes of communication.

He had tried climbing the chimney, but he soon found himself stopped by a narrow flue through which he could not force his body.

He was effectually caged.

The week of his imprisonment which we have

described was but the beginning of a long misery. It stretched onward to a month, and finally to two months.

Anybody of less vitality and strong spirits than Billy Brick would have succumbed to the terrible loneliness and narrowness of this improvised dungeon.

Yet at the end of the two months there was nothing in his voice to show that he had lost any of his old reckless humor.

He was as saucy and indomitable as ever to any of his captors.

Billy was not without something to keep up his spirits. Hope was not quite gone. A month ago it had suddenly occurred to him that the brick floor under his feet had something of a hollow sound. It was possible that there might be an opening below into the cellar.

Full of this idea he had diligently gone to work with an old pocket-knife which had not been taken from him.

With great labor he began to remove brick after brick. It was excessively slow work. He was three days in getting out the first brick. After that the others came easier.

But under these appeared others, and still others. There was a thick layer of brickwork. Yet it sounded more hollow as he descended. Evidently there was an opening below.

The floor of the fire-place, in fact, had been built on a brick arch rising from the cellar floor. Through that arch the prisoner was slowly cutting his way.

It was a painful and wearisome process, but the day came when the knife went through. A brick fell down, leaving an opening through which he could thrust his hand.

It was now but a question of days. If he could make the hole large enough to let his body through, before his work was discovered he was saved.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOOTSTEPS IN THE DARKNESS.

SOMETHING more than two months had passed from the date of the imprisonment of Billy Brick.

Nothing of him had yet been seen. His young companions had again tried to arouse the police, but had been told they would be kicked into the street if they came with any more of their lies.

Meanwhile Mickey Flanagan had got on the track of Toby, and was in a fair way to regain possession of the mysterious box.

On an evening in middle January the party of confederates were gathered in a room in Sterling Mansion. It was a cold night out, but all was cosy here, and they seemed comfortable and in the best of spirits.

They had reason to be. Two things had occurred to put them in good humor.

One was that the end of their long probation was at hand. On the next day the son of Marcus Sterling would be twenty-one years old, if living. If he failed to appear the property would become theirs, as heirs under the will.

The other was that they had received word from Mickey Flanagan that he had recovered the mysterious box, and would be there to deliver it and receive his reward that night.

It was for this purpose they had assembled. They did not know just what the casket contained. But they knew that old Grim was thoroughly conversant with the whole strange business, and felt sure that it held papers bearing upon the whereabouts of the lost son.

They were not safe while that casket was in existence. It might at any moment reveal proofs which would snatch from them the coveted estate and bring the true heir to his own.

"If it proves to be the boy in the chimney-corner, there is but one thing to do," said Smithers, with a dark look.

"Why not do it now?" answered Johnson, his crafty face wearing an ugly expression. "He has disappeared from the world. There is no need of his coming back."

"No, no," cried Tompkins. "I won't stand that. No useless work of that kind if you please. If there is enough in it, well and good. But I am not hardened enough to kill for a frolic."

"Useless, is it? Let that boy get out, with what he knows, and he will make it boiling hot for all of us."

They little dreamed that at that moment their prisoner was getting out, slipping down through the hole he had made into the cellar beneath.

"Nonsense! We can snap our fingers at him, as we have done at the other boys," remarked Tompkins. "What will the word of a street loafer weigh against that of the heirs of the Sterling Estate?"

"But Grim has given us the slip," remarked

Smithers. "He may return at any minute, and who knows what trouble he may make, if he finds that boy at large."

"I'll tell you this," cried Tompkins. "I shall never consent to any murderous work. We know by the way Grim held to that box that all his proofs lie in it. If we destroy its contents we have the game in our own hands."

"What is more, we do not know that this is the boy. It is only a surmise, on account of old Grim being friendly to him. For my part, I don't believe that Marcus Sterling's son could ever have descended to the level of a street vagabond. He would have too good blood for that."

"Good blood be fiddled!" answered Smithers, disdainfully. "You think, then, that because a boy has to make his own living, and has been brought up in the streets, that he is no better than a dog? I tell you that there are street boys that have in them the making of the best men in the land. A ragged coat is an emblem of poverty, not of disgrace."

"Bravo!" cried Johnson. "I did not think you were coming out as the advocate of street boys."

"Anyhow, they have as much wit and good principle as any other class of boys. Education is a good thing, but you want something else to make the man."

After some more conversation Tompkins left the room. He was getting anxious about the non-arrival of Mickey.

The two men left together and exchanged significant looks.

"He is growing chicken-hearted," remarked Smithers.

"We can do the work ourselves," rejoined Johnson. "A pinch of white powder in the boy's meat, and all will be over."

"After it is done, Tompkins dare not kick," returned the other, with a knowing wink.

For ten minutes more they continued to lay their dark plans. At the end of that time the sound of footsteps admonished them to be silent.

There were other footsteps in that house they could not hear. In the cellar a youthful form was feeling its way in the darkness, seeking the stairs that led upward into the house.

The door of the room in which the conference had taken place opened and Tompkins entered, followed by Polly Severn. Close behind them came another form, that of Mickey Flanagan.

He bore in under his arm a square object wrapped in paper.

The two men sprung eagerly to their feet.

"All is right, then? The boy is here? He has got it?"

"I rather think so," answered Mickey, in a drawling tone. "Hand me over a hundred dollars, according to promise, and the box is yours."

"That won't do," exclaimed Johnson. "We have been tricked once already with a false box. We must be sure that it is the true one."

"It is the box that Billy Brick dropped out of the window; I can swear to that," replied Mickey.

"See here, young fellow, you are smart for your age, but we are not quite fools," rejoined Tompkins. "The money promised you will get, if the box you bring is the one we are in search of. If not, we owe you nothing."

"It is the box you were trying to get from Billy Brick, that I know," remarked the boy, in a very positive tone. "And I don't calculate you'll go back on me. I happen to know a few things that it wouldn't pay to have blown. Here is the article."

Evidently Mickey Flanagan was no fool. He knew a thing or two. Yet he did not quite know the temper of the men he was dealing with, or he would not have shown his hand so plainly.

They exchanged meaning glances while he was taking the bundle from under his arm and slowly removing the paper in which it had been wrapped.

The object he laid on the table before them dazzled their eyes.

It was a casket made of polished steel, with ornamental lines of gold inlaid in its cover. It was about six by eight inches in size, and seemed to have been lately rubbed up, so that it flashed brightly in the lamplight.

The men fixed their eyes on it eagerly. They felt sure now they had hit the mark. Miss Severn pushed up to the table, full of hope and excitement.

"This must be it!" she cried. "It is too elegant to be got up for a cheat, like the other one."

"We shall soon see," answered Smithers, briefly, repressing the eagerness which filled his nerves.

He drew from a drawer in the table a large bunch of keys, which had been provided for this emergency.

These he proceeded to try, one by one, in the ornamented key-hole of the casket. After some time he inserted a key which moved easily in the lock.

All drew their breaths hard, and crowded around with glistening eyes. They seemed on the verge of success.

And meanwhile the silent footsteps which had moved through the cellar were now in the hall leading to the room in which this was taking place.

There were ears of which they did not dream within sound of their voices. There were feet of which they had no conception moving stealthily toward that room.

And out in the nightly gloom of the street were shadowy forms moving in that direction, and suppressed voices.

Events were preparing of which they did not dream. Surprise and peril were gathering about that group of villainous conspirators, even in the seeming moment of their triumph.

But utterly ignorant of this, their whole attention was fixed upon the mysterious casket, waiting for the click of the lock which should signify that its mystery was revealed.

The click came. The lock was vanquished. With a nervous motion Smithers caught the shining cover and flung it open.

What they expected to see they did not know themselves. Polly Severn looked as if she had hoped for the glare of a box filled with diamonds.

She drew back with a gesture of disgust and disappointment.

"Only papers!" she exclaimed.

"What did you look for?" demanded Smithers.

"I don't know. But something of more account than a bundle of moldy old documents."

"Then you will have your wish," rejoined Smithers, as he grasped the papers and threw them out on the table.

Beneath them, in the bottom of the box, lay a flashing array of jewels, in which the clear light of the diamond vied with the softer blue and crimson of other precious stones.

The excited woman eagerly grasped and drew out these shining emblems of wealth.

There were two or three complete sets of jewels, one set with diamonds, the others with rubies, sapphires, and other valuable gems.

Her eyes fairly gleamed and danced as she fixed them on these brilliant objects.

"That settles it," cried Tompkins. "These are the family jewels of the Sterling Estate. We have hit the mark at last."

"Then we owe this young man a hundred dollars for his work," remarked Johnson, fixing his crafty eyes suspiciously on Mickey, who was eagerly listening and looking, as if sharply seeking to get to the bottom of the secrets of these strange men.

"Give him his money and let him go," continued Johnson. "What these papers contain is private matter. We don't want to take any outsiders into our counsel."

This idea was evidently a good one. Much to his chagrin Mickey was paid and dismissed.

After seeing him to the door and shutting it behind him Johnson returned.

Smithers had, meanwhile, scattered the papers over the table, and picked from their midst an official-looking document on parchment, which he proceeded to examine.

A sharp cry of anger and triumph came from his lips, just as Johnson returned to the room.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed the latter.

"Glorious!" ejaculated Smithers. "We have been on the edge of a precipice, but we are saved. Only that old Grim was afraid the law would go hard with him for his ugly work this paper would have been entered up against us long ago."

"What is it?"

"It is a later will of Marcus Sterling, in which we are cut off from any share in the estate. He suspected us at last of having something to do with the loss of his son. The cunning fellow! He kept this to himself to the last."

"By Jove, old Grim has worked into our hands!" exclaimed Tompkins. "A blaze of fire to that bit of parchment and we are rich men. It is a glorious find."

"Go through the rest," demanded Johnson.

"I am eager to know just how things stand."

Smithers laid his hand on the remaining papers. But he lifted it again and raised his head in alarm, with his eyes fixed on the door.

All the others sprung hastily to their feet.

And with good reason, for at that moment an extraordinary hubbub had arisen in the hall.

There was the loud scraping of feet, a noise as if heavy bodies were being dragged to and fro, and a sound as of the voices of enraged animals.

This was succeeded by a heavy fall, and a kind of dull, crushing sound, followed by cries for help, and a growling voice like that of some furious beast.

Seizing the lamp, Tompkins rushed into the hall, followed closely by the others.

An unexpected sight revealed itself to their eyes. Two youthful forms were on the floor, one beneath and one above. And the upper one was hurling his fists into the face of the lower with a savageness that meant business.

"Help! Help!" came from the lips of the punished boy, whose face was already covered with blood.

"I'll help you, you dirty son of a sea mackerel!" roared the other, as he continued his blows. The lower boy was Mickey Flanagan.

Who was the upper?

They started in surprise, as they noticed a resemblance to their prisoner.

Tompkins rushed forward, grasped him by the collar, and dragged him to his feet.

Then the light of the lamp revealed the well-known features of Billy Brick.

A cry of consternation burst from their lips.

"You? This is incredible! You free and here?"

"Kinder think it's me," answered Billy with a grin. "Been a fool, I s'pose, to go fur this coon. But I come 'cross him creepin' back to listen ter what was goin' on, and I couldn't keep my paws off the dirty cur. Guess you'll say the tarrier had the best of it in that row."

"By heavens!" cried Smithers, "we have been on the brink of ruin! He was within an ace of escaping. Bring him back. We must decide what is to be done. This chap must be dealt with."

Billy was dragged back to the room, his eyes still glaring defiance on Mickey Flanagan, who crept after like a whipped hound.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HISTORY OF A CRIME.

"NEITHER of them are to be trusted," remarked Smithers, with a dark look. "We are not safe while either of those boys live."

The boys had been removed, and were now locked up, under guard of the gardener, who had been called in as an aid to the schemes of the villains.

"Walls will not hold that young rogue," replied Johnson. "He has cut a hole a foot and a half square through a solid brick arch."

"And the other one evidently intends to blackmail us. We will have no safety while they live."

"Yet what can they do?" asked Tompkins. "If that boy of Grim's is the real heir to the estate, there will be no proof of it when these papers are destroyed. We have nothing to fear. This will be a secret. Under the other we inherit the property."

"Don't be too sure of that," remarked Johnson. "We don't know what old Grim may hold in the background. It is better to make sure."

"Old Grim! A fig for him!" exclaimed Smithers. "He will not trouble me again. He has gone West. And in the West there are dangers to meet."

"What do you mean?" demanded Tompkins.

"That I have not been idle. I hardly fancy that Grim will escape a certain trap laid for him. I do not often bet, gentlemen, but I will wager my share in the Sterling Estate that old Grim's face is never seen again in this part of the world."

"I'll take that bet," came a strange, stern voice from the door, which made them all start as if they had been sitting on needles. "It is not a heavy one, for your share in the Sterling Estate is not worth a pinch of snuff."

The conspirators sprung to their feet, with cries of rage and consternation.

They had reason for alarm, for the face in the doorway was one that they all recognized, with a choking spasm of fear.

There stood the short, stout form, there appeared the grizzled, weather-beaten face, of no less a person than Jacob Grim.

The man of whose death they were so lightly conversing had come upon them like a specter, to confront and confound them in the midst of their plots.

"I think I have won that bet," said the old fellow, with his grimmest smile. "And you have lost your share of the Sterling Estate. The whole of you have lost."

We cannot go, step by step, over all that passed in the court that day. A hundred ques-

"Have we?" exclaimed Smithers, savagely. "That is not so sure."

He had grasped a heavy bludgeon from a corner of the room, and sprung forward, with a murderous gleam in his eyes.

His two confederates followed, seizing such weapons as came to their hands.

It looked as if the old man had returned only to meet his death at the hands of his desperate foes.

Yet there was no sign of fear in his sturdy face.

He simply stepped forward into the room, add in a moment the doorway was filled by the forms of a half-dozen burly, resolute men, who pressed into the room and confronted the assailants.

"Hold your level," exclaimed the leader of these, "or it will go rough with you. Back I say, and drop those weapons."

He drew a policeman's club as he spoke. There was no need of it. The villains had recoiled on seeing this reinforcement. They now stood cowering with fear.

At this moment there came a slight scream from the opposite side of the room.

All eyes turned to that quarter.

It came from Polly Severn. She had until then been so absorbed in the jewels taken from the box as to forget all things else.

But at sight of the leader of the opposite party she had let fall the shining trinkets, and started up with a cry of alarm.

He turned his eyes toward her, and a grim laugh broke from his lips.

"So, it is Miss Severn, the polite housekeeper, who was so anxious to have the house searched?" he remarked. "You did pull wool over my eyes neatly, I'll admit that. I hardly think you will succeed again."

He was the same person who had conducted the search before.

He bowed with mock politeness as his followers filed into the room, and took up their station against the wall.

This left the doorway unoccupied.

Jessie Johnson, the craftiest of the three villains, had been keenly watching the movements of the officers.

The opportunity he hoped for had arrived. No sooner was the passage clear than he suddenly grasped the heap of papers that lay on the table beside him, and made a desperate dash for the door.

The leader of the officers sprung forward to intercept him, but too late.

In a second he was through the doorway and in the hall outside. It looked as if he would escape, with the precious contents of the box.

Old Grim started after him, with a growl of rage.

One of the officers joined him. But, ere they reached the door there came the sound of voices, and of a struggle, from the outside.

"Back!" cried the leader of the officers. "He is in good hands. The rear-guard will attend to him."

He was right. In another minute several more men crowded into the room, bringing with them as prisoner the desperate villain, and the papers which he had sought to destroy.

They had also another prisoner. The rough-faced gardener, who had been left as guard over the boyish captives, was in their hands.

And, behind them came the round figure of young Toby, his dumpling-like face full of triumph.

Close in his wake came Billy Brick, his tongue in his cheek as he gazed on the discomfited villains.

And bringing up the rear, walked Mickey Flanagan, his face still plastered with blood, one eye swollen, and his whole look as if he had just buried his grandmother.

The tables had been decidedly turned.

It was a striking scene that appeared in the room at that moment.

Two of the villains remained behind the table, scared and cowering.

Two others were in the hands of the officers, handcuffed and helpless.

The valuable papers were firmly held by a stalwart officer.

At the end of the group of officers stood the grizzled old veteran, Jacob Grim, his face wearing its sourest look as he fixed his eyes on the pale countenances of his discomfited foes.

On the opposite side of the room was Polly Severn, cowering in a chair, with frightened eyes, while she was nervously thrusting into her pocket the jewels by which she had been fascinated.

Nearer the door stood the three boys. Toby proudly in advance, while Billy leaned against the door post, with his eyes on the face of Mickey Flanagan, who showed signs of an intention to slip away.

"I s'pose boys oughtn't to talk up 'mong men," remarked Toby. "But I reckon maybe these gemmans'd like to know *how* we came to pay 'em a visit."

"I kind o' calculate I'm down for that. That sneakin' pug-dog"—pointing to Mickey—"thought he was mighty smart when he stole that box. But he was see'd and he was fol-lered. I knowed where the pug'd break fur. An' I jist then come across Mr. Grim and told him what was loose. And that's how we're all here, if you wanten know."

"That is a fact," replied Grim. "Toby don't brag when he says that."

The eyes of Smithers and Tompkins were fixed on the boy with a savage glare. It would have gone hard with Toby if they had caught him alone just then.

"There are your prisoners," remarked the leader of the officers to his men. "Take them."

At this moment there was an unexpected diversion. While these words were being spoken Polly Severn had been creeping slyly around the wall toward the door, gliding step by step.

She seemed unobserved, the attention of the officers being otherwise engaged.

Suddenly she made a break for the door.

But she met with an unexpected obstacle. Billy Brick had not been quite asleep, even if he seemed solely occupied in watching his boyish foe.

When Polly attempted to dash through the door, to her surprise she dashed against the strong arm of the boy, which barred the way.

"I wouldn't go jist yit," he remarked, mockingly. "'Tain't perlite to go that way without kessin' good by nor nothin'."

"I'll kiss you, you ugly little wolf!" she hissed, darting upon him and clawing wildly at his face, while her eyes glared with rage.

It was as much as the boy could do to defend himself against the infuriated woman, and he would have got the worst of the bargain had not one of the officers come to his rescue.

The diversion thus created was taken advantage of by the ringleaders of the villains.

Smithers rushed to one of the windows of the room, and attempted to throw up the sash and leap out, but he was hindered by a catch above the sash. Ere he could open this Toby was upon him, clinging like a wild-cat to his arm.

With a violent oath he dashed his young assailant to the floor; but his opportunity was gone. A couple of the officers grappled with him ere he could repeat his endeavor. In a moment they had slipped handcuffs on his wrists.

His associates were served in the same fashion.

The game was at an end. The villainous crew had been caught at their moment of seeming triumph, and were in bands from which they would not find it easy to escape.

That night they all slept in prison.

The next day writs were issued against them on separate charges of child-stealing, conspiracy to defraud, and false imprisonment, all on the oath of Jacob Grim.

At the same time a demand was made upon the Orphan's Court for restoration of the Sterling Estate to its true heir, Harry Sterling, alias Billy Brick, now twenty-one years of age, and fully competent to inherit under the will.

That Billy was astounded need not be told.

"But I ain't twenty yit!" he cried. "So there ain't nothin' but sour buttermilk in this jag o' yours."

"You are twenty-one, my boy," rejoined old Grim. "Your age has been masked like everything else about you. I had my reasons for it all. I am to describe them to-morrow before the Judges of the Orphan's Court. I am going to prove that you are the son of a rich gentleman, instead of a street vagrant."

When the Orphan's Court assembled the next day it was well packed.

Some idea of the interesting disclosure that was to be made had got abroad, and the public had crowded in.

In a prominent seat, before the dignified judge, sat Jacob Grim. By his side sat his *protege*, Billy Brick, still in his ragged suit, but as independent in look as if he were judge himself.

Not far back sat the boy Toby and Judy Mulhgan, their eyes fixed on Billy with pride and admiration.

tions were asked, and it took several hours to tell what we can go over in a few minutes.

So we will but give the gist of Daddy Grim's story, in which he fully cleared up the mystery surrounding the Sterling Estate and its heir.

It appeared, then, that in his younger days, twenty years before, he had been somewhat wild, and had been acquainted with many desperate characters.

On one occasion, being reduced to poverty and desperation by an unlucky gambling operation, he had been approached by a villain named Jerry Taylor, and had been induced to join in an ugly scheme, for which a large sum was promised.

This was no less than the abduction of a child, then about two years old.

Driven by desperation he had joined in the illegal scheme; but on reaching the mansion from which the abduction was to take place he had discovered that it was the residence of Marcus Sterling, a gentleman who had been his friend many times in the past, and to whom he owed a debt of gratitude.

On learning this he had refused to go any further with the enterprise.

As Jerry, his associate, persisted, he had started to warn Mr. Sterling of what was intended; but Jerry had pursued him, felled him with the blow of a bludgeon, and left him senseless on the ground.

On coming to his senses again his memory of what had passed was entirely gone. His brain had been injured by the blow.

He had wandered off and made his way home, but for a year afterward he remained in a dazed condition, and had no recollection of what had passed on that night of crime.

He had heard the story of the abduction of the child of Marcus Sterling, and that a large reward was offered for his recovery, but failed to remember that he was conversant with the fact.

After a year his memory slowly returned. With surprise and horror he recalled his connection with the affair.

He was in doubt what to do. Just then, since the reward had brought no return, the authorities had withdrawn it, and offered a large reward for the capture of any one connected with the affair, threatening to deal with them very severely if they should be caught.

In the weak state of his brain this scared him, and he dared not make his participation known.

He set himself, on the contrary, to search for Jerry Taylor, determining to first find what had been done with the stolen child, and who were the hidden agents in this crime.

A year had passed in this search without effect. Then, on one stormy night, while lurking in the vicinity of Sterling Mansion, he had unexpectedly met Jerry Taylor coming from the direction of that edifice.

A fury of rage had come upon him in thus meeting his foe. He had attacked him and knocked him senseless.

In falling, a box had flown from Jerry's hands. This the half-insane man grasped and ran away with.

The next day he had recognized it as one which he had once seen in Marcus Sterling's possession. He knew then that Jerry Taylor had stolen it as he had stolen the child.

His first intention was to return it; but on reading the morning papers he discovered that Marcus Sterling had died the day before. The villains, whoever they were, had instigated Jerry to steal this box, doubtless containing valuable papers relating to the dead man's estate.

Grim was again scared. He was afraid to return the box, for fear of being charged with the robbery.

He determined to keep it in his possession until the secret villains should show their hands, and then come down upon them with the evidence he possessed.

He set himself again on the track of Jerry Taylor. This time he was lucky enough to trace him. He determined not to lose sight of him again until he should find the stolen boy.

In disguise he had followed Jerry and traced him to the house of William Smithers, one of the heirs under the Sterling will.

Shortly afterward Jerry had left the city, with the disguised spy in his wake.

He had gone to California, and in San Francisco had communicated with two other persons, Harry Tompkins and Jesse Johnson.

Through inquiry he learned that they also were heirs of the Sterling Estate, in case the lost son was not found.

The pursuer began to see through the game. He had learned who were the secret instigators of the abduction.

From this point he had followed Jerry Taylor to a mining town in Nevada.

Here Jerry had entered a family who had a reputed son somewhat over three years old. The ruffian had there gone into mining operations.

But by dint of questioning Grim had traced this family to another mining town, whence they had come six months before. On investigating there he learned that the boy was not their son, but had been left with them by a stranger who had at once departed from the town.

Inducing the man who told him this to accompany him to the other town he succeeded in having Jerry identified as this stranger.

There was no further doubt in his mind. This was the stolen child of Marcus Sterling. What to do was the next question.

Just then Jerry left the town. Grim now negotiated with the family, and by free use of money succeeded in buying the boy from them, and getting their testimony as to how they had obtained him.

He returned at once to Philadelphia with his valuable prize.

But, he was in doubt what to do. He could not prove that the child was the right one. Evidence from Jerry Taylor must be got to prove that.

He also soon saw that he was watched. Evidently the secret villains had got on his track.

Determined to finish his work he secretly put the child under the care of some poor friends of his, and again left the city in search of Jerry Taylor.

He was several years absent, and returned unsuccessful.

On reaching Philadelphia he found that his friends were both dead, and the seeming orphan was making his living on the street as a news-vender.

This suited Grim's plans. There was no better way of keeping secret the real history of the boy.

He knew he was watched, and dared not take charge of the friendless lad. Yet he kept a sort of silent guardianship over him, and befriended him so much that the boy began to look upon him as a sort of parent.

As time went on his enemies grew more bold. They suspected him of having the lost casket of the Sterling Estate, and made many efforts to get it from him, but without success.

Finally he had received tidings of the whereabouts of Jerry Taylor.

Afraid to take the casket with him, for fear of being pursued and perhaps killed, he had left it with the boy, with strict charge of secrecy, and gone in search of his old associate.

After a long search in the West, he had traced him, but found that he had returned to Philadelphia.

Thither Grim had at once returned, and arrived just in time to be of service.

He had learned from Toby, whom he knew as one of Billy's associates, all that had happened, and the peril of the lost boy.

He had at once led a party of police to the Sterling Mansion, and, as it proved, just in time to discomfit the villains in their plans.

He had learned more. In the ruffianly gardener he had discovered Jerry Taylor, the child-stealer whom he had so long pursued!

The telling of his long and exciting story was followed by the examination by the judge of the contents of the mysterious casket.

The jewels and papers had been replaced in it. Among the latter was the second will. Other papers were certain ones gathered and placed there by Grim. One was signed by the Nevada family, showing how and from whom they had received the boy left in their charge.

Another was signed by the Brick family, in whose charge Grim had left the boy. There were other papers to prove that the street boy, Billy Brick, was the reputed son of this family.

There was only one missing link.

And that was in possession of the prisoner Jerry Taylor.

This was gained from him by a shrewd detective. On promise of being favored in the coming trial he acknowledged the abduction and that he had placed the child with the Nevada family.

And the old nurse of the stolen boy was still living and able to identify Billy by certain marks which were on his body and which had been on that of her nursing.

The chain of evidence was complete. Billy Brick, the vagrant street boy, was proved to be the lost heir of the Sterling Estate, and the owner of a noble mansion and a property valued at several hundred thousand dollars.

We might dilate at length on all that followed but must bring our story to a close.

That the villains got their deserts we need scarcely say. The three principal rogues received ten years in prison each for their various crimes.

Taylor, the abductor, got the same sentence, but was told that he would have had twenty years but for his services to the commonwealth in turning State's evidence.

Polly Severn, who was proven to be an active accomplice of the villains, was sent for five years to the penitentiary to reflect on the consequences of crime.

As for Mickey Flanagan, there was no specially criminal act proved against him and he was set free with a severe admonition by the judge. His ill-gotten hundred dollars was taken from him and donated to the newsboys' home.

Such was the reward of crime.

Virtue also received its reward. Billy Brick, or Harry Sterling, to give him his proper name, was at once sent to school, and put under the training of teachers, who cured him of many of his rough ways, though they could not make a polished gentleman of him.

He insisted on Toby being his school companion, and the sharp little fellow proved an apt scholar and rapidly cast off his vagabondish ways.

As for Daddy Grim, he was placed in charge of the Sterling Estate, while Judy Mulligan became mistress of the tenant-house, with no trouble to pay rent and never a lack of provisions in her pantry.

It was five years before Harry Sterling was ready to come to his own, as master of the Sterling Estate.

Toby accompanied him as his friend and secretary.

And there the old friends yet live happily and peacefully together. Daddy Grim is growing very old and shaky, and Mrs. Mulligan has lost much of her old liveliness.

Yet their old days are happy days, while the young master of the estate has never forgotten his old street friends or let foolish pride enter his sound young heart.

THE END.

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"To the death, of course, Midnight!" was the rejoinder. "You're struck! Your blood spurted clean into my face."

"But it never leaped from my heart."

"Oho! well, I'll tap that fountain!"

"If you can, Golden."

The last word had scarcely left the road-agent's lips when he threw his antagonist half-way round and his knife hand struck the stone-wall heavily.

A cry told him what had befallen George. His knife, too, was gone!

The foes now grappled. In that Stygian gloom they went down to rise again, and fight with the weapons which Nature had given them. Now against the walls, now in the middle of the cave, now up, now down, they fought—to the death!

Once they paused for breath, standing erect like gladiators, the hand of each at the throat of the other; then at it again.

But this could not always last.

Midnight suddenly wrenched his foe from him; he flung him away and fell to the ground himself. As he did so something slid from under his feet—Golden's lost knife.

With a cry which he could not suppress, Midnight seized the weapon and listened. Beyond a dull thud that had followed his last success, he heard nothing of the Sport.

Many moments, knife in hand, the road-agent waited for a renewal of the combat; but it came not. At last he called the name of his foe; silence, as before!

"I'm armed; all the advantage is with me!" he said to himself. "Golden struck the wall. Maybe—"

He said no more but began to circumnavigate the cavern, his hand on the wall to guide him.

All at once he stopped and sprang back; his hand had touched the Sport's flesh.

"I'm going to pass in my checks, Midnight," said a voice in the gloom. "You've got my knife. I know it; but you needn't use it. There's nothing left of my head; you threw me plump against the wall. My last dust is on the table, and death holds all the trumps. Midnight, I didn't get to do it; no, I cannot keep my word! Your sister is in the canyon. Follow the bed westward to the petrified trunk of a tree. The cave is there. I left her safe. I was going to see if Nugget Noll was at the Agency. Didn't want to meet him, you know. Midnight, this tussle has been to the death. Where are you?"

"Here, Golden," and the victor crept forward till he bent over his foe—till he clasped the hand of the dying man.

"Did you tell Dora that—"

"No, I didn't," was the interruption; "but she more than half suspects. That girl has come away out here to make a man of you. Your father is dying; he wants you back. You ought to hear her tell how he took back the curse of exile; how—"

"Stop, Golden! let me think a moment. I am going back. I almost wish we hadn't met thus."

"No! that's not the way to talk. We were born to fight right here—that's my doctrine. You needn't tell the boys how I died. Let 'em think that I just disappeared. I'm going to quit talking now. Death has clutched Golden George's last stakes. I—throw—down the—cards!"

Midnight Jack knew what was coming; he felt a shiver run through the hand he held.

The death-gurgle broke the silence of the scene, and the fingers of Golden George, the Sport, fell from the road-agent's hand.

All was over!

"A man of his word!" said Midnight, rising. "He found his own tomb, and died in it. Good-by, Golden! I believe your doctrine, too. We were bound to fight to the death!"

The road-agent now turned his attention to escape from the cavern; and all at once he heard a human voice.

"This must be the place! Stay behind! I'll drop into the hole, for the Screamin' Eagle of the Smoky Roost has been in dark holes afore!"

Midnight Jack uttered a cry of delight, and the next instant the friends met.

"Look to the north, Dora. Up yonder is Sioux-land. Would you go back there?"

"Yes, to find the brother I have sought. Jack, if they had killed me—"

"I would not be here within sight of Fort Sully. What did I write on the wagon which I loaded with dead Indians—that I would exterminate the Sioux nation! But you live, Dora. I thank heaven I had not your death to avenge!"

"It is good-by to the road now?"

"No! it is farewell forever!"

When Midnight Jack rode boldly into Fort Sully, he was at once put under arrest by the commandant. But a sweet face and a sweeter voice pleaded for his release, and Midnight dared the colonel to point to one loyal citizen whom he had plundered. Then came the story of the father's curse—the exile—the stirring scenes which we have witnessed in the course of this narrative, and—the release.

The shout was now, "Eastward ho!"

Gopher Gid—or Gideon Weston as the boy's true name was—looked into the hill home again and bade it farewell.

A pair of eyes had more fascination for him than that little hermitage, and he made one of the East-bound party.

Time has rolled on. The soldier father is dead; the exile is a prosperous man far from the golden coast; and the little trapper's love has just been rewarded by the bestowal of a woman's hand.

Rube Rattler—he is back on the frontier where he tells with gusto how he hung for six hours in the sun-dance, by fastening the torture cords to straps beneath the old cavalry jacket!

He took the widow McGee, "dow'ry" and all.

THE END.

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